

**WOMEN'S EMBODIED SPIRITUAL GROWTH:  
LEARNING THROUGH NARRATIVE RESEARCH,  
TEACHING THROUGH NARRATIVE EDUCATION**

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the Faculty of the  
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**In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Doctor of Philosophy**

**by  
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## **Abstract**

### **Women's Embodied Spiritual Growth: Learning through Narrative Research, Teaching through Narrative Education**

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The primary purpose of this dissertation is to explore women's bodily experiences in relation to spiritual growth and to develop an educational method to nurture women's embodied spirituality. Women's bodily experiences, such as menstruation, body image, sexuality, sexual abuse, pregnancy, childbirth, mothering, menopause, and aging, are critical influences that nurture and challenge the spiritual being of adult women. Despite the importance, women's embodied spiritual growth has rarely been acknowledged or studied in Christian communities and in academic fields focused on human development and religious education.

This dissertation critically examines the faith and faith development theories of James Fowler, John Westerhoff III, and Thomas Groome, focusing particularly on the limitations of their understandings of women's embodied spiritual growth. To advocate the importance of women's embodied experiences in spiritual growth, the dissertation draws upon feminist understandings of women's embodied experiences in relation to theology, epistemology, psychology, education, pastoral care, and spirituality.

The characteristics of women's spiritual growth can best be understood, respected, and enhanced when women share stories about their embodied experiences; thus, a narrative approach is important for research and, also, for education. In the narrative research of this dissertation, twenty interviewees gave a full extempore narration of events and experiences from their embodied spiritual lives. These women described their faith



journeys and the influence of their bodily experiences. The interview results, enhanced by feminist literature in psychology and theology, provide foundations for a feminist vision of women's embodied spiritual growth. In order to move toward this vision, an embodied-narrative educational method is needed. Such a method can help women break silence, encourage women to describe their embodied experiences in relation to their spiritual journeys, and nurture and empower their embodied spiritual growth.

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## CHAPTER 1

### Introduction

Women's bodily experiences are central to women's emotional, intellectual, social, and spiritual development. Despite the importance of understanding women's spirituality in a full way, religious educators have rarely studied women's bodily experiences, especially not in relation to their spiritual growth. In addition, when women are invited to talk about their embodied experiences, they often have difficulty articulating these experiences and telling their stories because they have been affected by patriarchal control of women's experiences and voices. Three specific problems emerge.

The first problem is the neglect of bodily experiences in faith development theories. Many religious professionals, including religious educators, worldwide, get important insights from James Fowler's, John Westerhoff III's and Thomas Groome's theories of faith and faith development.<sup>1</sup> All of these theories describe diverse components of human faith and diverse styles, or stages, of faith. In spite of their great contribution to understandings of faith development, they take little account of the effect of women's bodily experiences on their spiritual growth. This limitation is significant in relation to understanding women's faith development in a holistic way because bodily experiences, such as menstruation, body image, sexuality, pregnancy, childbirth, and menopause, are critical influences that nurture and challenge women's spiritual growth. Religious

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<sup>1</sup> See, particularly: James Fowler, Stages of Faith (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981); Becoming Adult, Becoming Christian (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1984); John Westerhoff III, Will Our Children Have Faith? (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1976); Generation to Generation (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1979); Thomas Groome, Christian Religious Education (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1980); Sharing Faith (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991).

educators need to search for an alternative way for understanding women's embodied spiritual growth.

The second problem is that women have suppressed their own bodily experiences and sexuality rather than cultivating and drawing upon bodily experiences for their spiritual growth. Women's bodily experiences have been interpreted in negative ways or denied in patriarchal societies, and their physical bodies and sexuality have often been represented as the opposite of rationality and spirituality in Christianity.<sup>2</sup> Religious educators need to examine critically the inaccurate and false stereotypes of women's bodily experiences and to search for the importance and characteristics of women's embodied spirituality.

The third problem is the lack of educational approaches to awaken bodily awareness in people as they journey in faith. Because of social and religious controls of women's voices, women have primarily been listeners to biblical stories and church teachings and bodily awareness has been largely ignored. Even the writing on narrative communication and education pays little attention to bodily experience, though some seeds are planted.<sup>3</sup> Religious educators need to develop educational methods to help women break their long silence and tell stories of embodied spiritual journeys in their own voices. The narrative method can help women raise their consciousness of embodied spirituality and thus

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<sup>2</sup> This point is made by many feminist theologians. See, for example, Rosemary R. Ruether, Sexism and God-Talk (Boston: Beacon Press, 1983), 72-92; Melissa Raphael, Theology and Embodiment (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996), 183-219; Ursula King, Women and Spirituality (New York: New Amsterdam, 1989), 91-2.

<sup>3</sup> Maura O'Neill, Women Speaking, Women Listening (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1990); Anne Streaty Wimberly, Soul Stories (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994); Mary Elizabeth Moore, Teaching from the Heart (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991); Sam Amirtham, comp., Stories Make People (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1989).

empower their spiritual growth. In this dissertation, I will critically examine these problems and search for an alternate way for understanding, respecting, and enhancing women's embodied spiritual growth.

The purpose of this dissertation is to demonstrate the importance of women's embodied experiences in their spiritual growth and to search for an alternative means for understanding women's embodied spiritual journeys. Women's embodied experiences are central to women's spiritual growth; thus, the characteristics of women's spiritual growth can best be understood, respected, and enhanced by women's story-telling about their embodied experiences. An embodied-narrative method has the potential to awaken women to the power of an embodied spiritual journey, to empower women in their embodied spiritual growth, and to contribute to a deeper understanding of constructive feminist theories and faith developmental theories regarding embodied spiritual growth.

In this dissertation, I prefer to use "spiritual growth" rather than "faith development" in order to present women's embodied growth in faith. Faith development has often connoted cognitive or emotional development in religious education theories; it also implies hierarchical development toward higher stages of faith.<sup>4</sup> Spiritual growth includes physical, intuitive, intellectual, emotional, and social growth, involving the whole spiritual person in holistic ways; it also better explains the circular or spiraling process of women's embodied spiritual growth.<sup>5</sup> Spiritual growth is, thus, a holistic

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<sup>4</sup> This point will be argued by discussing the theories of James Fowler, John Westerhoff III, and Thomas Groome in Chapter 2.

<sup>5</sup> Many feminist theorists use the term, "spiritual growth," in order to highlight integral, holistic, and dynamic aspects in women's spiritual lives. See, Ursula King, *Women and Spirituality*; Joann Wolski Conn, ed., *Women's Spirituality* (New York: Paulist Press, 1986); Kathleen Fischer, *Women at the Well* (New York: Paulist Press, 1988); Maria Harris, *Dance of the Spirit* (New York: Bantam Books, 1989).



growth of an embodied being in relation to the divine, human beings, and the world.

Woman's "embodied spiritual growth" means that a woman becomes spiritually mature in touch with her experiences in and through her body in a concrete racial, economic, political, sexual, and cultural context. Unlike dualistic traditions in Christianity, this dissertation will advocate embodied spiritual growth as a vision of spiritual maturity.<sup>6</sup> Women's bodily experiences are central to their spiritual awakening, yearning, and maturing. When women are fully in touch with the experience of their own bodies, they can grow toward an integral spirituality that leads to true spiritual wholeness.

Women's bodily experience and embodied experience are important themes of this dissertation. In this dissertation, bodily experience means biological experience; embodied experience is an inclusive term that includes all human experiences in and through body. Women, as persons who live in and through a female body, have some distinctive experience of the world that men do not have. This dissertation will especially focus on some distinctive biological and sexual experiences, such as menstruation, sexuality, pregnancy, childbirth, and menopause. The intention of focusing on these bodily experiences is not to insist that biological functions determine women's roles nor to romanticize women's bodily experiences as mystical experiences, although these associations are sometimes real. The intention here is simply to acknowledge bodily influences on spiritual growth.

For two reasons, the focus of this dissertation is limited to a selection of women's

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<sup>6</sup> Many feminist theologians emphasize embodied theology or embodied spirituality. See Elisabeth Moltmann-Wendel, *I am My Body* (New York: Continuum, 1995); Melissa Raphael, *Theology and Embodiment*; Sallie McFague, *The Body of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993); Carter Heyward, *Our*

bodily experiences: it is limited to those experiences named by the interviewees, such as menstruation, body images, sexuality, sexual abuse, marriage, and divorce, pregnancy and childbirth, mothering and aging and menopause. Within that range, it is limited to those experiences which are used most often to justify women's discrimination and exclusion in Christian community and to claim women's spiritual inferiority. Women need to distinguish women's authentic embodied experience from inaccurate stereotypes and ideological illusions of women's bodily experiences.

From a feminist perspective and with a feminist vision, this dissertation will critically reflect on the interpretation of women's bodily experiences imposed by patriarchal religion and society, and search for an understanding of women's embodied experiences through women's authentic voices. Nannerl Keohane, M. Rosaldo and B. Gelpi distinguish between feminine, female, and feminist experience.<sup>7</sup> Feminine experience is concerned with those aspects of life and being which have traditionally been called 'feminine' and which often reinforce women's otherness in relation to men. It means that women experience themselves primarily as objects rather than as acting subjects. Female experience concerns the specific experience of women in conceiving and producing human life, in nurturing and sustaining its growth at the biological and personal level. Feminist experience entails the critical analysis of both feminine and female experience through critical reflection produced by consciousness-raising.<sup>8</sup> This dissertation will be

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Passion for Justice (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1984); Margaret R. Miles, Carnal Knowing (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989).

<sup>7</sup> Nannerl O. Keohane, Michelle Z. Rosaldo, and Barbara Gelpi, eds., Feminist Theory (Brighton, Sussex: Harvester Press, 1982)

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., ix-xi.

focused more on feminist experience, engaging in critical reflection on women's bodily experiences when falsified and alienated by a male-dominated culture and religion.

In Chapter 2, I will argue that James's Fowler's, John Westerhoff's, and Thomas Groome's theories of faith and faith development cannot explain the importance of women's bodily experiences in their spiritual growth. I will discuss the strengths and limitations of their theories in understanding women's spiritual growth in a holistic way.

In Chapter 3, I will get important insights from feminist theories, such as feminist theology, epistemology, and psychology, to acknowledge and understand the importance of women's bodies and bodily experiences. Among diverse perspectives in feminist theory, this dissertation will especially focus on feminist theorists who claim that bodily experiences are central for women's religious experiences, knowledge, and psychological development.

In Chapter 4, I will discuss the importance of women's bodily experience in their spiritual growth, drawing upon the theories of feminist educators, feminist pastoral theologians and caregivers, and feminist spiritual directors. This dissertation will especially focus on feminist theorists who present the interaction of bodily experiences with spiritual growth, and who suggest spiritual practices or educational methods that nurture and empower women's embodied spiritual growth.

In Chapter 5, I will uncover the importance of women's bodily experiences in their spiritual journey by using a narrative interview method. Interviewees have been asked to give a full extempore narration of events and experiences from their spiritual lives.<sup>9</sup> This

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<sup>9</sup> Gabriele Rosenthal, "Reconstruction of Life Stories," in *The Narrative Study of Lives*, eds. Ruthellen Josselson and Amia Lieblich (Newbury Park, Calif.: Sage Publications, 1993), 60. Resources for designing

research takes a feminist perspective. The aim of feminist research is not just to gain information, but also to realize women's full humanization and liberation.<sup>10</sup> By using a narrative method, this research will contribute to women's full humanization and spiritual maturation through producing knowledge about women's embodied spiritual growth and empowering interviewees to express their authentic voices.

Twenty women selected from diverse races, ages, sexuality, geography, and denominations have been invited to tell their embodied spiritual journeys. Thematic field analysis will be used to analyze narrated life stories. This analysis involves reconstructing the interviewees' systems of knowledge, their interpretations of their lives, and their classification of experiences; these are grouped into thematic fields.<sup>11</sup> The stories of interviewees are described and analyzed so as to reveal the women's bodily experiences, their relationships with family and others, their images of and relationships with God, their experiences of church, and their understandings of spiritual growth.

In Chapter 6, I will discuss a feminist vision of women's embodied spiritual growth, drawing upon women's voices in the live interviews and in feminist literature. The purpose of this dissertation is not to impose a universal norm of mature faith nor to develop a stage theory of faith development. This dissertation will search for an

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the research are: Elliot G. Mishler, *Research Interviewing* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986); Catherine K. Riessman, *Narrative Analysis* (Newbury Park, Calif.: Sage Publications., 1993).

<sup>10</sup> The authors in the book, *Beyond Methodology*, emphasize that the aim of feminist research is not just study, but the transformation of patriarchy and empowerment and emancipation of women. Mary M. Fonow and Judith A. Cook, eds., *Beyond Methodology* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 6, 61-77, 101-03, 133-50.

<sup>11</sup> Rosenthal, "Reconstruction of Life Stories." See also: Mishler, *Research Interviewing*; Donald E. Polkinghorne, *Narrative Knowing and the Human Sciences* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988).

alternative feminist vision of women's embodied spiritual maturity. "Feminist vision" means that the vision is not simply a description of women's embodied spiritual growth, but has intended goals as well. A feminist vision always aims toward women's fully embodied humanization and liberation.<sup>12</sup> I will articulate six categories for understanding spiritually mature women's embodied growth: body-affirming spirituality; embodied images of God; embodied relationships with other human beings; interdependent relationships with the world as God's body; involvement in the church as the Body of Christ; and embodied participation in social transformation.

In Chapter 7, I will demonstrate that an embodied-narrative method is an effective educational method to awaken women's disembodied understanding of their spiritual growth, to name their embodied experiences, and to nurture and empower their embodied spiritual growth. I will discuss the effect of narrative interview on women's spiritual growth, the reasons to advocate an embodied-narrative method as an effective educational method, and the possibilities for an embodied-narrative method in nourishing women's embodied spiritual growth.

The purpose of this dissertation is not to impose a universal norm or an "ideal" image of mature faith, but to identify qualities of mature faith that emerge in feminist literature and interviews with women. The foremost purpose of this dissertation is, thus, to search for an alternative feminist means for understanding women's embodied spiritual journeys. This research will show shared themes among a group of particular women; as such, it

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<sup>12</sup> Many feminist theologians maintain this principle. Rosemary R. Ruether maintains that the critical principle of feminist theology is the promotion of the full humanity of women in *Sexism and God-Talk*, 20. See also Letty M. Russell, *Human Liberation in a Feminist Perspective* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1974), 63-66.

may or may not be transferable to a larger population. As exploratory research, it will lay groundwork for further research.

In terms of the people studied, this dissertation will also be limited to a focus on adult women's spiritual growth and an educational method for adult women. Although the interviewees are diverse, the sample is limited to twenty adult women in Pennsylvania, New York, and California. Also, this research is limited to women who have been influenced by Christian faith and spiritual experiences. In spite of the importance of including diverse women's experiences, particular attention will be given to those themes named by the particular interviewees and in the literature, such as menstruation, body images, sexuality, sexual abuse, marriage and divorce, pregnancy and childbirth, mothering and aging and menopause.

The purpose of this dissertation is to demonstrate the importance and characteristics of women's bodily experiences in their spiritual growth. Therefore, this dissertation will not focus on women's emotional, intellectual, and social development in detail. Some of that work has already been done, and more will be needed in the future.

## CHAPTER 2

### Critical Analysis of the Faith Development Theories of James Fowler, John Westerhoff III, and Thomas Groome

One of the important questions for religious educators is how we can engage with others as partners and support lifelong faith development. Even though it is not possible to develop a universal norm of mature faith or a universal stage theory of faith development, it is very important for educators to understand diverse styles of faith and dynamic processes of maturation in order to empower and nurture each person's spiritual growth. James Fowler, John Westerhoff III, and Thomas Groome give important insights for understanding human faith and faith development; however, their theories have limitations for understanding women's embodied spiritual growth. They take little account of the effects of women's bodily experiences in relation to their faith development. In this chapter, I will review the developmental understandings of Fowler, Westerhoff, and Groome, and evaluate the strengths and limitations of each theory in understanding women's spiritual growth in a holistic way. These theorists are chosen because of their attention to human religious development and their major influence on religious education and practice in several parts of the world.

#### Description and Critique of James Fowler's

#### Faith and Faith Development Theory

#### Description of Fowler's Theory

James Fowler's research is particularly broad for understanding human faith

development in religious education.<sup>1</sup> Fowler believes that faith is a universal human concern. He does not claim faith as an indigenously Christian category nor limit faith to stages of ego development. According to Fowler, “faith” is the focal concept that holds together various interrelated dimensions of human knowing, valuing, committing and acting.<sup>2</sup> Every human being searches for meaning in relationship with others, with the larger world, and in accordance with coordinates of value and power recognized as ultimate.

In his recent book, Faithful Change, Fowler defines faith in a more inclusive sense:

Faith may be characterized as an integral, centering process, underlying the formation of beliefs, values, and meanings that (1) gives coherence and direction to person’s lives, (2) links them in shared trusts and loyalties with others, (3) grounds their personal stances and communal loyalties in a sense of relatedness to a larger frame of reference, and (4) enables them to face and deal with the limited conditions of human life, relying upon that which has the quality of ultimacy in their lives.<sup>3</sup>

Fowler clearly understands faith not as a static state or possession, but as an active state of knowing, construing, and interpreting experience. Through this activity, people make meaning out of their lives. Fowler’s understanding of faith is very social and relational. Human beings are members of many different faith-relational triads. The base lines of the triad are self, others, and shared centers of value and power. People are thus linked to one another in shared trusts and loyalties to centers of value and power. They share

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<sup>1</sup> Fowler, Stages of Faith.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 92.

<sup>3</sup> James W. Fowler, Faithful Change (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 56.



meanings and stories and celebrate common hopes.<sup>4</sup> For Fowler, human faith is changed in the reciprocal relationship between ultimate environment and everyday living.

Fowler develops his faith development theory under the influence of the structural developmental theories of Piaget and Kohlberg, but he constantly tries to overcome the limitations of cognitive-developmental perspectives. The epistemological emphasis in the structural-developmental theories influenced Fowler's understanding of faith as a way of knowing and interpreting. However, Fowler tried to widen the scope of knowing by including several different modes of knowing faith. Fowler recognizes that Piaget and Kohlberg separate cognition or knowing from emotion and affection.<sup>5</sup> He tried to incorporate the structuring of affective, valuational, and imaginal modes of knowing.<sup>6</sup> Especially in his recent books, Fowler emphasizes the emotions that accompany the shaping and reshaping of faith patterns. He privileges the self as constituted by patterns of construing, but tries to incorporate the influence of affections and values on these patterns of construing.<sup>7</sup>

Another important dimension of the structural-developmental tradition is its focus on structural features and changes in faith. Fowler describes different stages of faith,

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<sup>4</sup> Fowler, Stages of Faith, 17-19.

<sup>5</sup> Lawrence Kohlberg clearly presents that his stages are stages of moral reasoning, not of emotions, aspirations, or action. See, The Psychology of Moral Development (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1984), 224. Kohlberg's assumptions concerning the centrality of justice were derived directly from Piaget's study of the development of moral judgment and reasoning. See Jean Piaget, The Moral Judgment of the Child (Glencoe, Ill: Free Press, 1948).

<sup>6</sup> Fowler, Stages of Faith, 99.

<sup>7</sup> Fowler, Faithful Change, 55, 85.

comparing different styles or stages of faith among people in the same faith community or content-tradition.<sup>8</sup> As Piaget and Kohlberg believe that development results from efforts to restore balance between subject and environment,<sup>9</sup> Fowler also believes that growth in faith results from life crises that bring disequilibrium and necessitate changes in ways of seeing and living one's faith. Faith-stage transitions are neither automatic nor inevitable. Each new stage integrates and carries forward the operations of all the previous stages.<sup>10</sup> Whereas Piaget and Kohlberg describe the cumulative integration as hierarchical, Fowler proposes a spiraling model.<sup>11</sup> Fowler claims that the whole process of faith development is dynamically connected, and that each successive spiral stage is linked to and built upon previous ones. Each stage has within itself potential wholeness and integrity. As people make transitions from one spiral stage level to another, they

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<sup>8</sup> Fowler, Stages of Faith, 99.

<sup>9</sup> Piaget thinks that cognitive equilibration is a procession toward a better equilibrium through the process of assimilation and accommodation. The subject's spontaneous initiatives and chance encounters with the objects in the environment are complementary aspects of development. See Jean Piaget, The Development of Thought (New York: Viking Press, 1977), 3-8. According to Kohlberg, development of cognitive structure is the result of processes of interaction between the structure of the organism and the structure of the environment, rather than being the direct result of maturation or the direct result of learning (Kohlberg, 8).

<sup>10</sup> Fowler, Stages of Faith, 100-01.

<sup>11</sup> Piaget believes that stages imply distinct or qualitative differences in children's modes of thinking or solving problems. Cognitive stages are hierarchical integrations. The later schemes are richer than the preceding, since the increasing ability in abstraction leads to a great number of compositions and this increased wealth of regulations offers improved control (Piaget, The Development of Thought, 179-80). Kohlberg also thinks that the concept of stages implies an invariant order or sequence of development. Cultural and environmental factors, or innate capabilities may help one child reach a given step earlier than another child, but all children will still go through the steps in the same order (Kohlberg, 19).

experience increases in intimacy with self-others-world and a widening of vision and valuing.<sup>12</sup>

In addition to the structural-developmental tradition, Fowler also relies upon Erikson's psychosocial development theory to interpret crises within the life cycle and functional aspects of faith.<sup>13</sup> Human faith development cannot be separated from maturation, chronological age, and the life challenges that all persons must face. Faith helps people cope at every structural stage across the life cycle.<sup>14</sup> Fowler also gets insights from Daniel Levinson about transitions in adult development. However, Fowler distinguishes his faith theory from other psychosocial theories. He says, "Unlike the psychosocial theorists, the faith stage perspective does not see developmental movement in the sense of stage change as coming automatically or inevitably with the passage of time and the changing of our bodies or of our social roles."<sup>15</sup> Fowler maintains that people reconstruct their ways of knowing and valuing by encountering a life situation that their previous ways of meaning can no longer handle. A new stage emerges by realizing the limitation of the previous ways of knowing and by searching for new ways of knowing. Fowler claims that people develop in faith by constructing successively more inclusive, more

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<sup>12</sup> Fowler, Stages of Faith, 274-75.

<sup>13</sup> Erikson thinks that the human personality, in principle, develops according to steps predetermined in the growing person's readiness to be driven toward, to be aware of, and to interact with, a widening social radius. The society is usually constituted so as to invite this succession of potentialities, with safeguards to encourage the proper rate and the proper sequence of their enfolding. Erik H. Erikson, Childhood and Society (New York: W. W. Norton, 1950), 270.

<sup>14</sup> Fowler, Stages of Faith, 106-09.

<sup>15</sup> Fowler, Becoming Adult, Becoming Christian, 139.

internally complex, and more flexible ways of appropriating the contents of their religious tradition.<sup>16</sup>

In his more recent works, Fowler focuses on Christian faith development specifically. He holds that Christian faith involves a process of maturation and growth as people move from one season of life to the next, but that the process of maturation is not in itself sufficient. He believes that the ongoing process of centering and recentering, of deepening and making integral commitments to partnership with God in Christ is the dynamic of faith. He writes that the “dance of faith development” in human lives has twin movements; of maturation and development and of centering and transformation in Christ.<sup>17</sup>

He describes a pre-stage and six distinctive stages of human faith. The pre-stage, undifferentiated faith, is not accessible to empirical research, but it provides the seeds of trust, courage, hope and love for later faith development. The emergent strength of faith in this stage is basic trust and a relational experience of mutuality with primary caregivers.<sup>18</sup> Faith stage 1, intuitive-projective faith, is the fantasy-filled, imitative phase. Through imaginative processes, the child can unify and understand the experience and world in powerful images. The child can be influenced by examples, moods, actions, and stories of faith through mutual interaction with parents or close people.<sup>19</sup> In stage 2,

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 139.

<sup>17</sup> James W. Fowler, Weaving the New Creation (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991), 94.

<sup>18</sup> Fowler, Stages of Faith, 120-21.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 133-34.

mystic-literal faith, people can order the previous stage's imaginative composition of the world by increasing their concrete operations. With the new capacity of narrative construction, they can use story as the major way to attribute unity and value to experience. They begin to take on the stories, beliefs, symbols, and myths of their communities.<sup>20</sup> In stage 3, synthetic-conventional faith, people deeply feel their beliefs and values and synthesize values and information, but they cannot step outside them to reflect on or examine them explicitly or systematically.<sup>21</sup>

In stage 4, individuative-reflective faith, people do not rely on conventional authority; rather, they take personal responsibility for commitments, lifestyle, beliefs, and attitudes. People in this stage can critically reflect upon their own identity and worldview.<sup>22</sup> In his recent works, Fowler connects the individuative-reflective stage with the Enlightenment. Like the Enlightenment, the individuative-reflective stage is paralleled by a second movement in which the knowing subject makes the self, with its capacities and constitution, the object of critical inquiry and reflection. The conception of faith and faith development theory is made necessary by the Enlightenment and is one fruit of the Enlightenment's efforts to reform religion.<sup>23</sup>

In stage 5, conjunctive faith, people can respect others' truths and communicate their own truth in relation to others' truths. Beyond the dependent or independent stages, they

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 149-50.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 172-73.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 182-83.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 152-57.

are capable of being in faith by interdependent ways. They can reclaim and rework their past and listen to the voices of their deeper selves. They can critically recognize their social unconscious, including the myths, images, symbols, and prejudices within their particular social, religious, or ethnic communities. They live and act between an untransformed world and a transforming vision.<sup>24</sup> More recently, Fowler suggests that, structurally, postmodern consciousness parallels the conjunctive pattern of faith-consciousness. For him, practical postmodern faith requires practices that enable persons to integrate internal systems of consciousness and unconscious dimensions of psyche and spirit. Fowler suggests the need to support and nurture political and cultural leaders who are prepared to claim and model conjunctive faith in American society.<sup>25</sup>

Stage 6 is universalizing faith; it is a moral and ascetic actualization of the universalizing apprehensions. Persons in this stage engage in radical commitment to justice and love for a transformed world, in accord with an intentionality that is both divine and transcendent. They do not have abstract visions, but rather they commit their total being to actualizing the spirit of an inclusive and fulfilled human community.<sup>26</sup> Fowler's normative images of Stage 6 are strongly influenced by H. Richard Niebuhr's description of radical monotheistic faith. This radical monotheistic faith is oriented toward the coming Kingdom of God. In light of this vision, a universal human vocation is to live in anticipation of the coming reign of God and to take responsibility for

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 197-98.

<sup>25</sup> Fowler, *Faithful Change*, 172-78.

<sup>26</sup> Fowler, *Stages of Faith*, 199-211.

reconciling, redeeming, and restoring work, which responds to the coming Kingdom of God.<sup>27</sup>

### Critique of Fowler's Theory

Fowler's faith development theory is very helpful for understanding human faith and its structure; however, his theory has some limitations for understanding women's faith development in holistic ways. First, Fowler's research has a tendency to be more cognitively oriented. His main concerns are a person's knowing and valuing of life experience and relationship with others. The categories he uses to analyze interviews are: the locus of authority, form of world coherence, symbolic function, bounds of social awareness, form of logic, and forms of moral judgment.<sup>28</sup> Even though Fowler understands faith as relational and affective, his research focuses more on cognitive development because he has been influenced by Piaget and Kohlberg's structural development theories. Fowler's understanding of faith is biased toward an "intellectual being."

In western male-dominated culture, the highest social value is assigned to mind and reason, and embodied knowledge and emotion are devalued. Maria Harris points out that "the imagery of cognition as developing upward to the abstract, or moral reasoning as toward a higher universal principle, may be more consonant with male than with female experience."<sup>29</sup> According to the report of a research project by the Religious Education

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 204-10.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 244-45.

<sup>29</sup> Maria Harris, "Completion and Faith Development," in *Faith Development and Fowler*, eds. Craig Dykstra and Sharon Parks (Birmingham: Religious Education Press, 1986), 127.

Association, women have a greater emotional involvement in their faith development, and they explore more fully the meaning of their faith experience than men. This research presents that “more women than men define ‘faith’ as ‘a relationship with God’ while more men than women define it as ‘a set of beliefs.’”<sup>30</sup> In Fowler's research, which focuses on knowing and construing, women's faith development cannot be researched adequately because, socially, men are often more oriented to developing their cognitive ability, and women are more often oriented to developing their emotional and interpersonal ability, in this society.<sup>31</sup>

Fowler's theory is especially quiet about women's embodied experiences. Sharon Parks thinks that “Fowler's emphasis on cognition or knowing may reflect not only Piaget's preoccupation with cognition, but also the split in most of Protestant theology between head and heart, mind and body.”<sup>32</sup> The Christian dualistic tradition has rejected and distrusted the human body, especially the female body, as an impediment for spiritual growth and faith development. Feminists challenge dualistic thinking about body and soul. They maintain that the human body must be reclaimed as a vehicle for the divine and as a locus of spiritual maturation. People cannot expect spiritual growth when their

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<sup>30</sup> Religious Education Association of the United States and Canada, Faith Development in the Adult Life Cycle (Minneapolis: Religious Education Association, 1987), 17.

<sup>31</sup> There are characteristics widely associated with each gender in this society. Masculine characteristics involve logical/rational, objective, analytical, strong, independent, self-confident, aggressive, and dominant ways of being. Femininity involves emotional, sensitive, nurturing, cooperative, interdependent, intuitive, and sympathetic ways. In this gender-role identity, certain forms of masculinity and femininity are socially expected and regarded as healthy. Variations from the norm are viewed as deviant. Ellen Piel Cook, Psychological Androgyny (New York: Pergamon Press, 1985), 3-7.

<sup>32</sup> Sharon D. Parks, “Faith Development in a Changing World,” in Christian Perspectives on Faith Development, eds. Jeff Astley and Leslie Francis (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1992), 98.



bodies are devalued, misnamed, abused, exploited or suppressed. Faith is not limited to intellectual or emotional activity. In light of this discussion, faith should be understood in a more holistic way, including not only belief, trust, commitment, and action, but also the physical, emotional, imaginative, and aesthetic powers within persons. It is important to trust our intuitive processes and embodied knowledge as valuable resources for spiritual growth.

The second limitation of Fowler's theory is the fact that Fowler's vision of universalizing faith points to a universal goal. Even though Fowler does not insist that stage 6 of faith should be the aim of religious education, many educators may take stage 6 as the normative image of mature faith, implicitly identifying the sixth stage as the purpose of religious education. Universalizing faith is characterized by people who have a radical commitment to justice and love and a selfless passion for a transformed world. Fowler's vision of mature faith, stage 6, includes a commitment to the unity of all persons and to the fulfillment of universal human rights and social justice. Fowler believes that justice in human rights is an ultimate value. According to his description of stage 6, its exemplars are Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr., Mother Teresa of Calcutta, Dag Hammarskjöld, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Abraham Heschel, and Thomas Merton.<sup>33</sup> With the exception of Mother Teresa, all of his exemplars are men who committed their lives to social justice. In some way, they gave up their personal lives for a larger good, social justice. They sacrificed even their own family for social transformation. Social transformation for social justice seems, then, to typify the valuable and mature life,

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<sup>33</sup> Fowler, Stages of Faith, 201.

implicitly devaluing human participation in the daily creation and sustenance of the living community. This is prejudicial.

Traditional ideals of mature faith or spiritual perfection must be changed. Care, nurturing, receptivity, emotion, imagination, and relationality have been largely devalued and excluded from qualities of mature faith. People need to reassert the importance of these qualities and to integrate them into the lives of all persons for their spiritual growth. Carol Gilligan's study of women's moral judgment shows us that women often speak a "different voice" of truth. According to her study, women often develop the ethic of care through an ongoing process of relational attachment that creates and sustains the human community. This contrasts with the pattern more common for men, who develop their abilities of separation and an increasingly sophisticated ethic of justice.<sup>34</sup> For women, to be a mature human being means to care for others and for self without hurt and violence. Gilligan thinks that these different voices, although not gender specific, are gender related. Gender differences recurrently observed in moral reasoning signify differences in moral orientation.<sup>35</sup> According to Gilligan, "the values of care and connection, salient in women's thinking, imply a view of self and other as interdependent and of relationships as networks created and sustained by attention and response."<sup>36</sup> Many

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<sup>34</sup> Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982), 156.

<sup>35</sup> Carol Gilligan, "Remapping the Moral Domain: New Images of Self in Relationship," in *Mapping the Moral Domain*, eds. Carol Gilligan, Janie Victoria Ward, and Jill McLean Taylor (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), 8.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

women participate in this daily creating, nurturing, and transforming process, but these women's lives are often seen as less contributory to social ideals in patriarchal society. New meanings of spiritual maturity must include creating, nurturing, and caring activities in daily lives, and not be limited solely to the larger social context.

The third limitation of Fowler's theory is the fact that Fowler does not carefully deal with the relationship between faith content and faith structure. His research focuses on the structural characteristics of faith rather than its content; however, the content of faith is co-related to structure, contributing to the forming and reforming of faith structures. Persons' meaning-making is formed by their shared experiences and the content of their community. In patriarchal society, the power to name and to identify reality has been largely held by men. The patriarchal Christian tradition has taught women to believe the authority outside themselves such as the authority of men and an externalized male-figured God. The patriarchal content of faith discourages women's abilities to exercise critical reflection and a transforming vision; both are necessary for more mature faith structure. In patriarchal Christian tradition, women have heard a distorted message regarding women's bodies and sexuality as a source of sin and evil.<sup>37</sup> Patriarchal Christian tradition has limited women's capacities for spiritual maturation. Many women have experienced spiritual and emotional violence by patriarchal beliefs and systems, and have kept silence. A person's faith cannot be separated from the content of faith shared

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<sup>37</sup> This point is made by many feminist theologians and is succinctly articulated by Rosemary R. Ruether. Ruether argues that in clerical mysogyny, woman's body is described with violent disgust as the image of decay. Woman's physical presence drags down the souls of men to carnal lust and thus to eternal damnation. As symbol of the body, sexuality, and maternity, woman represents the evil lower nature. Ruether, Sexism and God-Talk, chap. 3.

in faith community. To move toward wholeness of personal faith, both faith traditions and structures that impede female spiritual growth must be examined.

The fourth limitation of Fowler's theory is the fact that Fowler depends largely upon male-biased psychological development theories to understand human development. Fowler derives primary insights from Piaget's cognitive development, Selman's study of role taking, Erikson's psychosocial stage theory, Kohlberg's moral development and Levinson's research of the seasons of a man's life. Many of these contemporary developmental studies upon which he relies are skewed toward a Western, middle class, male point of view.

Feminist scholars, such as Carol Gilligan, Mary F. Belenky and her colleagues, Nancy Chodorow, and J. B. Miller, have analyzed the male bias in present models of human development and are beginning to make a differentiated and distinctive contribution to the understanding of women's development.<sup>38</sup> In the late 1970s, Carol Gilligan criticized prejudices and misunderstandings about women in psychological theories, finding theoretical deficiencies existing.<sup>39</sup> Gilligan argues that Kohlberg's conception of morality is androcentric in that Kohlberg emphasizes traditionally masculine values such as

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<sup>38</sup> Gilligan and Belenky and her colleagues represent gender differences, such as differences in moral reasoning and in acquiring and organizing knowledge, in their books, In a Different Voice and Women's Ways of Knowing. Chodorow and Miller provide varying accounts of the origins of gender difference, in their books, Feminist and Psychoanalytic Theory and Toward a New Psychology of Women. Their emphasis on women's capacities for relationships and on the richness of women's inner experiences contributes to countering the cultural devaluation of women and to a positive evaluation of women's attributes.

<sup>39</sup> Gilligan, In a Different Voice, 5-23.

rationality, individuality, abstraction, detachment, and impersonality.<sup>40</sup> She also argues that in Erikson's view of the life cycle, development is identified with separation, and attachment appears as a developmental impediment. Gilligan criticizes Erikson for not giving as much attention to women's lives as he does to men's, despite his observation of gender differences.<sup>41</sup> Levinson also focuses on the exclusively male experiences in his research on the seasons of a man's life.<sup>42</sup> To understand the characteristics and process of human development in a more inclusive way, we need to accept critically the present human development theories and, also, to derive important insights from feminist research.

In Fowler's research and theory of human faith development, he attempts to understand the nature and aspects of faith and the dynamics of faith development; however, his theory does not take full account of human embodied experiences, particularly women's embodied experiences, in relation to faith development.

### Description and Critique of John H. Westerhoff III's

#### Faith and Faith Development Theory

#### Description of Westerhoff's Theory

John H. Westerhoff understands faith as God's gift, given fully and freely to everyone through the community of faith. He believes that each human being has faith at birth;

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 19-23.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 63-64.

<sup>42</sup> Daniel J. Levinson et al., The Seasons of a Man's Life (New York: Ballantine Books, 1978). In 1996, Levinson published a book called The Seasons of a Woman's Life, but Fowler's work did not deal with Levinson's later work about the seasons of a woman's life (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1996).

thus, faith is innate and not given to us by others. For him, faith is not taught to others; it is a gift that we share with each other.<sup>43</sup> Westerhoff is especially concerned with the faith development of children and the responsibility of adults and the faith community toward them. He maintains that children are socialized by adults and the community into their religious beliefs and attitudes toward God. The faith of children is directly related to their experiences at home and in the church.<sup>44</sup> Thus, a community of faith and its adults need deliberately to engage in an educational ministry for faith growth in children.

Westerhoff defines faith as the expression of meaning revealed in a person's life-style and the foundation upon which a person lives life. Especially, Westerhoff emphasizes the human intuitive, emotional, imaginative, responsive nature to have Christian faith. He suggests that one must retain or recapture the imagination and wonder of childhood, and experience the spontaneity, creativity, and excitement that they knew as children.<sup>45</sup> Westerhoff also stresses action as an outward expression of an inward faith. He understands faith as "a way of behaving which involves knowing, being, and willing."<sup>46</sup> He thinks that the content of faith is described in terms of world-view and value system, but that faith itself is an action. For him, faith is formed, changed and expanded through our actions with others, and it expresses itself daily in our actions with others. He believes that Christians are specially chosen people, called to join God in God's

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<sup>43</sup> John H. Westerhoff III, Bringing up Children in the Christian Faith (Minneapolis: Winston Press, 1980), 28.

<sup>44</sup> Westerhoff, Generation to Generation, 116-21.

<sup>45</sup> Westerhoff, Bringing up Children in the Christian Faith, 19-20.

<sup>46</sup> Westerhoff, Will Our Children Have Faith?, 89.

liberating historic actions.<sup>47</sup> Westerhoff thinks that the Christian faith is not founded upon a Gospel of good works or advanced learning, but on the good news of God's action in Jesus Christ.<sup>48</sup>

Westerhoff distinguishes faith from religion. Westerhoff thinks that educators can teach about religion, but they cannot teach people faith: it cannot be taught by any method of instruction. Faith can be inspired within a community of faith, but it cannot be given to one person by another. For Westerhoff, experience is pivotal and central to human faith. He insists that living faith demands experience. A person can have faith through the experience in a faith community. To understand faith and its content, religious educators need to focus on the experiences of interaction between and among faithing persons in a self-conscious tradition bearing community of faith.<sup>49</sup>

For Westerhoff, the community of faith is the most important element for human faith growth. For him, Christian faith can never be individualistic. Christian life is to be lived in and for the community of God. The faith of a person is expressed and mediated through and within faith community. Westerhoff believes that faith is expressed, transformed, and made meaningful by persons sharing their faith in an historical, tradition-bearing community of faith.<sup>50</sup> Therefore, he emphasizes an educational ministry centered on experiences of interaction between and among persons according to their

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 64-65.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 37.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 81.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 23.

faith needs. For these reasons, educators need to provide specific experiences that help persons move from one style of faith to another.

Westerhoff further believes that the important role of the church is to be a witnessing community of faith. He chooses the word “enculturation” to emphasize the process of interaction among persons of all ages, creating environments within which persons act to acquire, sustain, change, and transmit their understandings and ways of life.<sup>51</sup> Westerhoff believes that a living Christian faith demands a community of faith that shares a common story, authority, worship, and life.

Westerhoff suggests that faith expands through four distinctive styles of faith. He says that he was first influenced to think about stages, or styles, in the development of faith through Fowler’s research. For Westerhoff, a person’s faith can be expanded, or become more complex, but an expanded faith is not a greater faith; therefore, one’s style of faith is not to be judged.

According to Westerhoff, the first style of faith is experienced faith. During the preschool and early children years, children typically act with experienced faith. A person first learns Christ, not as a theological affirmation, but as an affective experience. Experiences of trust, love, and acceptance are important to Christian faith.<sup>52</sup> The second style is affiliative faith. During the childhood and early adolescent years, persons seek to

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 80.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 91-93.



act with others in an accepting community with a clear sense of identity. Persons with affiliative faith need to belong to an identity-conscious community of faith.<sup>53</sup>

The third style is searching faith. During late adolescence, persons often act over against the understanding of faith acquired earlier. In this style, acts of the intellect, critical judgment, and inquiry are important as people question the meanings and purposes of the community's story and actions.<sup>54</sup> The fourth style is owned faith. Persons owned by their faith strive to witness to that faith in both word and deed. They struggle to eliminate any dissonance between their faith as stated in their beliefs and their actions in the world.<sup>55</sup> In his later work, Westerhoff calls owned faith a mature faith. People with mature faith have a clear sense of their identity, and are secure enough to be open to others and to experiences that aid them in growing toward greater awareness of God and more consistent actions with God in the world.<sup>56</sup>

Westerhoff claims that people expand from one style of faith to another only if the proper environment, experiences and interactions are present. Westerhoff believes that people expand their faith slowly and gradually, adding one style at a time in an orderly process over time. Each new style is added to the previous ones.<sup>57</sup> He maintains that our lives as people of faith are pilgrimages that move slowly and gradually through ever-

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 94-96.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 96-97.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 98-99.

<sup>56</sup> Westerhoff, Bringing up Children in the Christian Faith, 26-27.

<sup>57</sup> Westerhoff, Will Our Children Have Faith?, 90-91.

expanding expressions. More recently, Westerhoff focuses on spiritual pilgrimage. He believes that everyone experiences spiritual journey and does so in her or his own way, and that he or she grows into an ever-deepening and loving relationship with God.<sup>58</sup>

### Critique of Westerhoff's Theory

Westerhoff gives important insights to educators about people as historical actors, the importance of faith community for people's faith development, and enculturation as an educational method. However, Westerhoff's understanding of faith and faith development has some limitations and problems. First of all, Westerhoff's emphasis on communal faith has a tendency to disregard a person's unique identity and embodied experience. He recognizes that different persons have different learning needs, learning styles, and capacities for learning. He identifies different personality types designating alpha, beta, gamma, and delta personalities;<sup>59</sup> however, he does not attend so much to individual differences.

Apart from differences in personality types, each person has her or his own history, cultural and racial background, and sexual and class identity. In a community, there is always some degree of diversity in terms of sex, race, class, and culture. Even though people share common stories, myths, symbols and visions in a faith community, each person may experience them differently, depending on his or her concrete situation and embodied experience. This means that women may experience shared stories, myths, symbols and visions in a faith community differently from men. This reality poses a

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<sup>58</sup> John H. Westerhoff III, Spiritual Life (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994), 13.

<sup>59</sup> John H. Westerhoff III, Living the Faith Community (Minneapolis: Winston Press, 1985), 87-91.

problem because shared stories, myths, symbols, and visions in Christian community have often represented male experiences and voices. Women's stories, symbols, myths and visions, especially those based on bodily experiences, have rarely been shared in Christian community. As Westerhoff stresses the particularity and uniqueness of Christianity and the common ground of faith community, he is less concerned about the diversity of community members and the uniqueness of each human being beyond personality types.

The second limitation of Westerhoff's theory is that his idea of enculturation potentially admits of an uncritical transmission of experiences of dominant groups. He claims that the goals of religious socialization are the transmission and support of a particular faith and life-style. Westerhoff himself emphasizes the particularity of Christianity and its clear call for people to participate in historical action in light of the Christ event.<sup>60</sup> For him, Christian faith can only be nurtured and transmitted within a self-conscious intentional community of faith.

Westerhoff fails to recognize that patriarchal Christian teaching and practice have contributed to restricting, rather than empowering, women's spiritual growth. Women's embodied spiritual growth has been severely damaged by distortions of patriarchal Christian tradition. Feminists point out how sexist faith tradition is harmful for women's spiritual growth.<sup>61</sup> Transmission of a faith tradition without critical consciousness can discourage critical questions and compel people to obey uncritically the authority of their

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<sup>60</sup> Westerhoff, Generation to Generation, 82-83.

<sup>61</sup> See, Ursula King, Women and Spirituality; Joann Wolski Conn, ed., Women's Spirituality; Elizabeth

faith community. To be spiritually mature, people need to raise questions about whether their faith tradition can fully nurture and empower their own embodied faith journeys and, also, transform oppressive and destructive traditions.

The third limitation of Westerhoff's theory is that his proposals for renewing liturgy through the human life cycle are "generic" without reference to any of women's bodily experiences, although he links learning and liturgy from birth to death. In the book, Liturgy and Learning Through the Life Cycle, Westerhoff attempts to guide the complete life cycle of persons and church;<sup>62</sup> however, his guidance of liturgy has no explicit room for celebrating women's bodily experience in Christian faith community. For women, bodily experiences such as menstruation, pregnancy, childbirth, sexuality, and menopause are critical to their self-identity and spiritual growth. Women's life cycles cannot be acknowledged without understanding their bodily experiences. Because Westerhoff focuses on the transmission of faith from generation to generation without gender reference, there is little possibility of creating new beliefs, values, and life-styles, or of celebrating gender-related experiences. As Westerhoff insists, liturgy is central to the human faith journey and spiritual growth. If this is the case, women need to create new liturgy and rituals to recognize, empower, and nurture their own embodied spiritual journeys.

The fourth limitation of Westerhoff's theory is that his description of four styles of faith does not attend to the circular and spiraling process of human life. Westerhoff helps

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D. Gray, ed., Sacred Dimensions of Women's Experience (Wellesley, Mass.: Roundtable Press, 1988).

<sup>62</sup> John H. Westerhoff III and William H. Willimon, Liturgy and Learning through the Life Cycle (Akron, Ohio: OSL Publications, 1980).

us to see the various styles of faith. He holds that a person's faith expands in an orderly process over time. For him, people cannot skip from the first style of faith to the third style of faith. This hierarchical or linear model of faith development hardly explains the circular or spiraling process of a woman's life. Women's faith is often rocked and moved by life crises. Through life transitions, including biological transitions, women live in a lifelong tension between integration and destruction. They move back and forth in their struggle toward mature faith. Extreme life crises, such as abortion, rape, miscarriage, or divorce, can sometimes decimate women's faith utterly and make them experience spiritual chaos or even spiritual death. However, in part because of their biology, women implicitly understand that there is a creative seed in their pain and suffering. They know the nature of their vulnerability at each transitional period. When a woman takes each life transition in her life's circular process as an opportunity for faith growth, her spiritual life can become more creative and mature, despite or because of its challenges.

Westerhoff understands faith as a holistic matter. He stresses the importance of a person's intuitive ability for faith development, alongside intellectual ability. He also emphasizes action as an expression of faith. In spite of his effort to understand faith as a holistic affair, his theory does not deal with the importance of bodily experiences in relation to faith development.

## Description and Critique of Thomas Groome's

### Faith and Faith Development Theory

#### Description of Groome's Theory

Even though Thomas Groome does not develop a stage theory of faith development, he suggests more inclusive components of faith. Like Fowler and Westerhoff, Groome believes that Christian faith is always a gift of God's grace. He believes that the Christian community and its educators cannot "give" faith to anyone. Faith is the gift of God, and human faith is a response to God's grace. The Christian community must share its lived faith, making accessible the tradition of faith embodied in the community.<sup>63</sup> Educators need to nurture people in the specificity of the faith tradition. For Groome, the reign of God provides the ultimate hermeneutical principle for lived Christian faith and for fullness of human life. In Christian Religious Education, he claims that the Kingdom of God is central to the understanding and purpose of Christian faith and the purpose of Christian life;<sup>64</sup> however, he changes the symbol to "Reign of God" in Sharing Faith, responding to the feminist critique of the patriarchal Kingdom symbol.<sup>65</sup> According to Groome, the reign of God as the metapurpose of Christian religious education evokes God's activity in history and demands that people be historical agents of God's reign. It

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<sup>63</sup> Groome, Christian Religious Education, 56.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 35-51.

<sup>65</sup> Groome, Sharing Faith, 14-17.

symbolizes God's intention of peace and justice, love and freedom, wholeness and fullness of life for all, and the well-being of creation.<sup>66</sup>

Groome claims that Christian faith is a lived reality--an existential developmental reality. For Groome, lived Christian faith is a holistic affair that engages the whole of a person's being. For Groome, faith has three essential dimensions. It is a belief conviction, a trusting relationship, and a lived life of agape. Groome describes three activities of faith as believing, trusting, and doing.<sup>67</sup> His cognitive/mental dimension to Christian faith involves the process of recognizing, understanding, appropriating, and deciding about human experiences and the person's tradition's beliefs and convictions. Groome claims that Christian faith is at least belief, but it must also be more than belief if it is to be a lived reality. Western mentality has a tendency to make faith and belief synonymous terms. Groome says that to see Christian faith only as belief, in the sense of rational assent, increases the split between faith and daily life. He criticizes the equation of faith with belief and objects to the idea of faith as a matter only of the head.

Groome emphasizes the affective and behavioral dimensions of Christian faith.<sup>68</sup> The affective dimension takes the form of a relationship of trust and confidence in a personal God. Faith is expressed by commitment of the total person to a trusting relationship with God in Jesus Christ. This trusting activity needs to be embodied in the daily existence of

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 16-17.

<sup>67</sup> Groome, Christian Religious Education, 57.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 57-61.

redeemed people.<sup>69</sup> Faith, then, is trusting in one's relationship with God and all humankind. Christian faith includes doing God's will. Lived Christian faith demands doing what is known of God's will. A life of loving engagement in the world is crucial to the Christian tradition. Faith-as-doing is a response to the Kingdom of God.<sup>70</sup> Christian faith can never be withdrawal from the world.

For Groome, these three activities, believing, trusting, and doing, cannot be separated in the life of the Christian community. The faith life of the community must include all three activities, and human faith needs to keep a balance among the three activities. Groome warns against the exclusion of one dimension by overemphasizing another. When a person sees faith as only belief, she or he tends to split faith from daily life. Purely functional faith may become mindless activism without reflection or conviction of belief.<sup>71</sup> Christian faith is a lifelong developmental process involving the whole person. Faith growth is intertwined with a person's maturation as a human being.

Unlike other theorists who rarely mention the importance of bodily experience in faith development, Groome emphasizes bodily aspects of human faith in his book Sharing Faith. He emphasizes bodily, mental, and volitional aspects of human beings. For him, faith includes their bodily, mental and volitional capacities.<sup>72</sup> He emphasizes the incarnate, sensuous, and intuitive wisdom of the body, and the importance of respect and

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 60-62.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 63.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 60-65.

<sup>72</sup> Groome, Sharing Faith, 18.



care for the well-being of one's own and others' bodies.<sup>73</sup> According to Groome, the body knows and has its own felt truth and meaning--an organic inner wisdom that is body-logical before reason-logical. The body has an incarnate wisdom that it carries and maintains within itself from the past into the present and future. However, this body wisdom has been excluded or marginalized in Western education. Groome insists that a pedagogy for conation must encourage people to express their consciousness and body wisdom from their corporeal feelings, sensings, and labors.<sup>74</sup> Groome also emphasizes the importance of being sensitive to each person's age, sex, race, economic class, and so on. He suggests that educators need to encourage participants to attend critically to how their bodies may have been devalued over time by age bias, sexism, racism, and consumerism in their culture.<sup>75</sup>

Groome gives important insights into understanding human faith as a holistic affair including "bodily, mental, and volitional capacities; heads, hearts, and life-style; cognition, desire, and action; understanding, relationship, and service; conviction, prayer, and agape."<sup>76</sup> He advises people to maintain balance among diverse aspects of their faith. When a person overemphasizes one dimension, she or he may not grow spiritually mature in a holistic way.

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 88-91.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 93-94.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 91.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 18.

### Critique of Groome's Theory

In spite of his inclusive perspective of faith, Groome's understanding of growth in faith has some limitations. First, Groome does not develop his idea of bodily capacities and body wisdom in relation to concrete human bodily experiences and sexuality. His concern is for the wisdom of body, an incarnate wisdom. His main concern for the body is epistemological and general. However, human bodily experiences are important for faith growth, not only for the wisdom they provide, but also for the pain, love, pleasure, happiness, and creative power that come from them. Groome, especially, does not give attention to women's bodily experiences in relation to faith growth. Women's bodily experiences, such as menstruation, pregnancy, childbirth, and menopause, are especially critical experiences for their spiritual growth, and educators need to be more concerned with such experiences.

The second limitation of Groome's theory is that his symbol of the Reign of God cannot be the vision of all lived faith communities. He changes his symbol from the Kingdom of God to the reign of God because of strong feminist rejection of the former.<sup>77</sup> For women, the Kingdom of God is a patriarchal symbol that represents the ruling of a male supreme God. The Reign of God is similar to the Kingdom of God, however, functioning as a patriarchal symbol based in images of God as King, Sovereign, Lord, and Warrior. These symbols may provide profound meanings for many men and women about God's intentions and activities in human history. On the other hand, these dominant male images of God often cause women to have negative images of their

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<sup>77</sup> Groome, Sharing Faith, 14.

female bodies and continue to sustain a patriarchal church and culture. This patriarchal symbol may not provide a liberating and nurturing symbol for women's embodied spiritual growth. Women need nurturing and empowering symbols from Christian faith, symbols that affirm their embodied experiences. Symbols that represent mature lived faith and ultimate visions of Christian faith need to be challenged, transformed and recreated by women's embodied experiences; these have largely been repressed and silenced in Christian community.

The third limitation of Groome's theory is its limitation for transforming Christian patriarchal tradition and community. This limitation is a matter of accent because Groome strongly emphasizes the Christian tradition and community as crucial to lived Christian faith. He suggests that the Christian community needs to nurture people in their faith tradition. When we consider the patriarchal reality in Christian tradition and community, his emphasis may not sufficiently challenge the patriarchal Christian Story and Vision; further, it may not give sufficient encouragement for creating new stories and visions with women's embodied experiences. Even though Groome proposes a dialectical hermeneutics between the Christian Story and Vision and participants' stories and visions,<sup>78</sup> women often have difficulty discerning the truth of their own stories and visions and challenging the patriarchal Story and Vision in so far as Christian Story and Vision have more authority than their own stories and visions in Christian community.

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<sup>78</sup> Groome, Christian Religious Education, 207-23.

Groome understands faith as a holistic affair that engages the whole of human life. He particularly explores body wisdom in lived faith; however, he does not fully develop how human bodily experiences influence one's faith development in dynamic ways.

### Conclusion

It is very important to review critically the theories of Fowler, Westerhoff, and Groome because of the vast influence of these theorists in religious education, particularly in understanding faith, and styles or stages of faith. They provide important insights into understanding the diverse components of faith and the process of faith maturation. They emphasize that faith is dynamic, relational and a lifelong process. Faith is not static, but it is continually changing in human experiences.

Despite the great contribution of these three eminent theorists to understanding human faith and faith development, their theories have limitations in understanding women's embodied spiritual growth in a holistic way. Woman's embodied spiritual growth is her life-long journey as a whole person who experiences the divine, other human beings and the world in and through her body in a concrete socio-economic, cultural, racial, and sexual context. These theorists do not fully understand the dynamic influences, both nurturing and challenging, of women's embodied experiences. An understanding of spiritual maturity must not be static and universal, but must be reformed and renewed by human embodied experiences, including women's experiences.

Under the influence of disembodied tradition in Christianity and faith development theories, religious educators have neglected the importance of understanding, nurturing and empowering women's embodied spiritual growth in faith community. Religious

educators need to search for an alternative way of understanding women's embodied spiritual growth. Feminist theology, epistemology, and psychology can help religious educators to correct their misunderstandings of women's embodied experiences and to understand the importance of women's bodily experiences in relation to their spiritual growth. With that end in view, the next chapter is focused on feminist theories of women's bodily experiences.

## CHAPTER 3

### Women's Bodily Experiences in Feminist Theories

Women's bodily experiences have been disregarded or misinterpreted in many academic fields. In the areas of theology, epistemology, and psychology, male experience has represented normative human experience, and women's experience has been interpreted in the light of male experience. Patriarchal Christian teaching and practice, Western dualistic thought about body and soul, and male-dominated psychological research and theories restrict a holistic understanding of women's embodied spiritual growth. Contemporary feminist theorists have begun to raise questions about male-biased theories. They argue that male theories are often disembodied theories that dissociate body from mind, and exclude bodily experiences, especially women's experiences. In this chapter, I will discuss feminist understandings of women's bodies as central to religious experience, knowledge, and psychological development.

### Women's Bodily Experiences in Feminist Theology

In Christian tradition, the female body itself has been used as a primary reason to exclude women from the priesthood and liturgy. The Christian church has constantly repressed the body and excluded or devalued all that is bodily, especially women's bodily experiences. Thus, woman's full personhood has been denied on the basis of her body. While patriarchal theology idealizes disembodied rationality and disembodied spirituality, feminist theology affirms bodily experience and embodied religious experience. Feminist

theologians reject dualistic thought that values mind over body, and spirituality over physicality; they claim the importance of embodiment for women's spirituality.

In patriarchal Christian tradition, many women have devalued their bodies and sexuality. According to Levitical law, a woman's body was regarded as unclean during menstruation and after birth; touching it would make a man unclean. For that same reason, women were in principle kept at a distance from the sacraments in the early Christian church.<sup>1</sup> While the Christian tradition did not sacralize female embodiment, it sacralized male embodiment in so far as Jesus was the incarnation of God and redeemed the world through his bodily pain.<sup>2</sup> Further, dualistic Greek philosophy held that women resided in a lower realm of matter or body, to be ruled by or shunned by the transcendent mind. From this influence, Christianity formed a hierachal chain of being: God-spirits-male-female-nonhuman nature-matter.

Early Church Fathers, such as Augustine and Aquinas, thought that women were evil, tempting, uncontrollable, and seductive. As a symbol of the body and sexuality, women often were used to represent the evil lower nature.<sup>3</sup> Augustine and Aquinas believed that women represented the image of God in their souls, but not on the bodily level. For them, the relation between man and woman was compared to the relation between flesh and spirit in human beings, thus, the feminine elements--cupidity and sensuousness--should be dominated by the male elements--spirit and reason. The state of woman's subjection

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<sup>1</sup> Elisabeth Moltmann-Wendel, I Am My Body, 39.

<sup>2</sup> Melissa Raphael, Thealogy and Embodiment, 78.

<sup>3</sup> Rosemary R. Ruether, Sexism and God-Talk, 78-80.

was strictly and exclusively bound up with her existence as a sexual creature.<sup>4</sup> Augustine and Aquinas believed that the devil used Eve as an instrument to bring about the fall of Adam because of her intellectual weakness. The evil of concupiscence was the effect of the first fall, destroying the sovereignty of the rational soul.<sup>5</sup> After his conversion, Augustine considered a life of continence as absolutely necessary for the acquisition of wisdom, and the practice of sexual asceticism as a means of attaining the contemplation of truth. Although Augustine regarded detachment from women as a superior and spiritual life for men, he had an inner conflict caused by his inability to live without a woman.<sup>6</sup>

Margaret R. Miles argues that the male spiritual leaders in Christianity alienated the vulnerable, dependent, pleasure-seeking aspects of themselves and projected these qualities onto actual women who were then seen to threaten their spiritual progress.<sup>7</sup> The early Church Fathers had a fear of losing control of their sexuality, and that fear of their own sexuality influenced their understanding of women's bodies, leading them to theologize negatively about women.

Late medieval culture moved toward an increasingly negative image of woman. Women, even nuns, were seen primarily as sexual dangers to men. Particularly in clerical misogyny, woman's body was described with violent disgust as the image of decay. Her

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<sup>4</sup> Kari Elisabeth Borresen, *Subordination and Equivalence*, trans. Charles H. Talbot (Washington, D.C: University Press of America, 1981), 26-32, 167-78.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 53-61, 204-14.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 2-6.

<sup>7</sup> Margaret R. Miles, *Practicing Christianity* (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1990), 100.



physical presence was said to drag the souls of men into carnal lust and thus to eternal damnation.<sup>8</sup> In the fourteenth through seventeenth centuries, the fears of body, nature, and loss of control over the lower orders erupted in prolonged bouts of witch-hunting that took the lives of many women.<sup>9</sup> The male Reformers also ultimately relied upon their own physical experiences without paying sufficient attention to the female body.<sup>10</sup>

Feminist theologians oppose uncritical obedience to patriarchal Christian dogma and teachings that devalue and oppress women and their bodily experiences. They refuse to participate in a religious history that damages and distrusts the female body; instead they celebrate embodiment as a locus of religious meaning and experience. In reclaiming women's bodies, they are stating "not only that the material, the physical, is a vehicle for the divine, but that change is holy, that passion is sacred and self-direction the path of divinity."<sup>11</sup> According to them, experience is embodied; we are bodies that experience. Experience is always embodied for human beings, not only in relation to the natural world, but also culturally, economically, sexually, and socially. Feminist theologians are committed to celebrating the dignity and worth of women's bodies, rooted in their bodily experiences.

Feminist theologians such as Sallie McFague, Margaret R. Miles, Carter Heyward, and Beverly W. Harrison challenge the dualistic traditions of body and mind and the

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<sup>8</sup> Ruether, Sexism and God-Talk, 80-81.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 82.

<sup>10</sup> Moltmann-Wendel, 45.

<sup>11</sup> Lisa Isherwood and Dorothea McEwan, Introducing Feminist Theology (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), 113.

denigration of women's bodies and sexuality in Christianity. These theologians reclaim Christianity as an embodied religion. McFague insists that Christianity is the religion of incarnation par excellence. According to her, the earliest and most persistent doctrines of Christianity focused on embodiment: the incarnation (the Word made flesh); christology (Christ as fully human); the eucharist (this is my body, this is my blood); the resurrection of the body; and the church (the body of Christ who is its head).<sup>12</sup> McFague insists that people know God "through divine incarnation in nature and in the paradigmatic Jesus of Nazareth, in the universe as God's body and in the cosmic Christ."<sup>13</sup> For McFague, Christianity has been a religion of the body. Margaret R. Miles also argues that contempt for the body is fundamentally inconsistent with the Christian doctrines of creation, the incarnation of Christ, and the resurrection of the body.<sup>14</sup>

Feminist theologians reject a dualistic understanding of body and mind, or body and spirit, and advocate the importance of the body and bodily experiences for knowing God and maintaining a relationship with God. By identifying men with rationality and woman with body, Christian society has denigrated woman's body. McFague criticizes Western culture and religion as having a long, painful history of demeaning the female by identifying her with the body and with nature, while elevating the male by identifying him with reason and spirit.<sup>15</sup> For McFague, we do not have bodies, rather we are bodies,

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<sup>12</sup> Sallie McFague, Body of God, 14.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 194.

<sup>14</sup> Miles, Practicing Christianity, 95.

<sup>15</sup> McFague, Body of God, 14-15.

“body and soul.” Human beings are inspirited bodies--living, loving, thinking bodies.<sup>16</sup> McFague understands that we are known through our enlivened, inspirited bodies, and what we know of God is mediated in the body through the spirit.<sup>17</sup>

Carter Heyward also insists upon a body-centered feminist theology. Heyward strongly maintains that without an awareness and an appreciation of their bodies, humans are impotent, disempowered, disembodied, disfigured characters, who know no relation to anything and who can have no experience of God in-carnate.<sup>18</sup> Heyward insists upon the holiness of the body. For her, body is the ground of all holiness. Human bodies are a part of God’s body in the world. The emphasis upon the body is an incarnational affirmation of what it means to be fully human. Human bodies are alive with feeling and power; as such, they participate in the divine movement.<sup>19</sup> Margaret Miles also roundly rejects disembodied and abstract knowing and advocates embodied knowing. She calls embodied knowledge “carnal knowing.” Carnal knowing is both embodied and social. It includes the most private and intimate experiences as well as the most public and social experiences.<sup>20</sup>

Feminist theologians affirm sexuality as a spiritual power and a positive force. Within the Judeo-Christian tradition, sexuality has been posited as the enemy of spiritual

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 16-20.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 194.

<sup>18</sup> Carter Heyward, Our Passion for Justice, 172.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 139-41, 172.

<sup>20</sup> Margaret R. Miles, Carnal Knowing, 9.

development. Many women have denied their own needs for bodily pleasure. When women are active sexually or are self-initiating, society define them as “whores” or “deviants.” Carter Heyward argues,

Being human means being self-consciously able to love and be loved: involved in, immersed in, related passionately to God and to human beings, respecting and cherishing that which makes each loved one uniquely who she or he is and is becoming - be this loved one male or female, black or white, old or young, sick or well.<sup>21</sup>

According to Heyward, sexuality is the wellspring of vitality in all relationships, all creativity, and all productivity. To be out of touch with sexuality is to be literally cut off “--physically, emotionally, spiritually, politically--from our remarkable and potent capacity to co-create, co-redeem, and co-bless the world.”<sup>22</sup> Neither men nor women should see sexual desire or any other innate bodily desire as an enemy to be feared and controlled. People need to learn to hear the messages circulating in their bodies, to interpret them correctly, and to cooperate with them.

Beverly W. Harrison also insists that women need to regain the capacity to celebrate their sexuality as inherent in their own embodiedness in the positive reappropriation and appreciation of themselves as embodied persons.<sup>23</sup> Many women have denied or suppressed their own needs or desires for bodily pleasure in male-defined societies. In feminist insight, sexuality is mutual pleasure in the context of genuine openness and intimacy. For Harrison, our energy-- literally, the gift of life-- is body-mediated energy.

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<sup>21</sup> Heyward, 45.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 130.

<sup>23</sup> Beverly Wildung Harrison, Making the Connections (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985), 87.

Sexuality does not detract from the power of personal being, but rather deepens and shapes personal being. The body mediates the individual's real, physical connectedness to all things. Because sexuality represents the most intense interaction with the world, it is a key to the quality and integrity of spirituality overall.<sup>24</sup>

Womanist theologians also emphasize the importance of women's bodily experiences in their religious lives, adding emphases that are largely missing in the work of white women. They emphasize the diversity of women's bodily experiences and the double and triple oppression and exploitation of women of color. Women experience through their bodies in diverse contexts of race, class, sexuality, and culture. As an African-American womanist theologian, Delores S. Williams shows the interplay of oppressions based on race, sex, and class. Williams shows how women's self-esteem and sense of self-worth are threatened when they have no power to control their bodies. From the days of slavery to the present day, African-American women have suffered from poverty, sexual and economic exploitation, surrogacy, domestic violence, homelessness, rape, motherhood, and single-parenting. Williams emphasizes the powerlessness of African-American slave women who had no control over their own bodies. Williams stresses the vulnerability of Black women's bodies to destructive domestic and social forces.<sup>25</sup> Here, women's bodily exploitation is primarily associated with social-role exploitation. In present society, many black women still experience powerlessness over their own bodies. Black women have multi-role demands and experience multi-exploitation of their bodies

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 149.

<sup>25</sup> Delores S. Williams, Sisters in the Wilderness (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1993), 3-6.

and labor. Williams also criticizes the false images of Black women's sexuality. The antebellum image-making of Black women's sexuality as loose, over-sexed, erotic, readily responsive to men, continues to devalue black womanhood and negatively influence respect for Black women's bodies and their dignity and motherhood.<sup>26</sup>

Williams describes how the color of the human body makes a difference in the everyday life in American culture. She talks about how repulsion and devaluing of the color black have been internalized in the national conscienceness. Many people's sense of self-worth comes from the color of their bodies. Black skin commonly connotes intellectual and moral inferiority. Williams criticizes white racial narcissistic attitudes. She opposes that culture's oppressive aesthetic values of "acceptable female beauty."<sup>27</sup> Women of color suffer pressure to shape themselves as closely as they can to those of white women. However, through their bodily pains and struggle for freedom, African-American women have great survival wisdom.

Asian feminist theologians also represent the importance of women's bodies in their spiritual lives, especially by focusing on racial, classical, and national domination and exploitation of Asian women's bodies. According to Hyun Kyung Chung, Asian women have become "no-body" under the body-killing structures of powers such as foreign domination, state repression, militarism, racial strife, and capitalism. Women's bodies are controlled and their labors are exploited.<sup>28</sup> The systematic women-hatred under

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 70-71.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 85-91.

<sup>28</sup> Hyun Kyung Chung, Struggle to be the Sun Again (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1990), 38-39

patriarchal society makes Asian women's lives miserable. They have long been silenced by physical and psychological intimidation and actual bodily violence by men. Many poor Asian women in the Philippines, Thailand, Korea and other countries have been violated by men from the First World, and also men from their own countries. Asian women's bodies are literally torn, choked, bruised and killed by men.<sup>29</sup> The Asian woman knows the depth of humanity and the pain of other women because she has suffered bodily. For Chung, Asian women's epistemology is "an epistemology from the broken body, a broken body longing for healing and wholeness."<sup>30</sup>

In spite of diverse interests and independent strains of feminist and womanist theologies, they share common ground: the idea that women's bodily experiences are central to women's religious experience. Feminist embodied theology rejects all abstract spirituality that is dissociated from the body, earth, and social relationships. Feminist theologians seek to reclaim Christianity as an embodied religion and to reclaim the importance of women's bodies and sexuality to women for knowing God and the world. They celebrate the dignity and sacredness of women's bodies, and emphasize women's embodiment as a locus of religious meaning and experience.

#### Women's Bodily Experiences in Feminist Epistemology

Feminist thinkers advocate embodied thinking in coming to know truth. They criticize the disembodied epistemological tradition in Western philosophy. With dualistic understandings of the soul over the body, reason over emotion, male over female, many

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 46.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 39.

male philosophers and educators in the Western culture have believed that knowledge has always been construed exclusively by mind. They have agreed that mental activity is disengaged from bodily activity. The great philosophical masters such as Plato, Aristotle, Descartes, Kant, Hegel, Russell and Sartre based their philosophies on a rationalistic epistemological dualism of body and mind.<sup>31</sup> The ideals of rationality and objectivity have guided and inspired theorists of knowledge throughout the history of Western philosophy. These ideals have been constructed through processes of excluding the attributes and experiences commonly associated with femaleness and underclass social status: emotion, connection, practicality, sensitivity, and idiosyncrasy.<sup>32</sup> Many features of contemporary knowledge can be linked to male disembodiment, male detachment from his manliness in producing knowledge or truth. The pervasive cultural belief in the disassociation of mind from body leads to an increase in disassociative practices; all are encouraged to abandon sensorimotor awareness for abstract mathematical or linguistic forms.<sup>33</sup> In this tradition, knowledge is exclusively related to one's mind and cognitive ability; one's bodily experience is ignored or denied as contributory. Feminist theorists began to raise questions about disembodied knowledge received as absolute "truth."

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<sup>31</sup> Mari Sorri and Jerry H. Gill elaborate how Western philosophers construed knowledge exclusively in relation to the mind. According to them, Plato emphasized the obvious disembodied character of knowledge. Aristotle thought that rationality is the highest and only unique human function, and cognition is the exclusive prerogative of the mind disengaged from the body. Modern rationalists such as Descartes, Spinoza, and Leibniz agreed that mind alone engages in and constitutes cognitive activity. Kant also thought that knowledge is fundamentally an affair of mind, and cognitivity is exclusively a function of pure, disembodied reason. Hegel thought that rationality and reality are exclusively mental in character. Sorri and Gill, *A Post-Modern Epistemology* (Lewinston, N.Y.: Edwin Mellen Press, 1990), 1-21.

<sup>32</sup> Lorraine Code, "Taking Subjectivity into Account," in *Feminist Epistemologies*, eds. Linda Alcoff and Elizabeth Potter (New York: Routledge, 1993), 21.

<sup>33</sup> Drew Leder, *The Absent Body* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 152.



Unlike the disembodied tradition of Western philosophy, feminist epistemology lays claim to embodied thinking. Feminists insist that people can understand human experiences fully only by reclaiming the value and knowledge found in the human body. In their book, A Post-Modern Epistemology: Language, Truth, and Body, Mari Sorri and Jerry Gill assert a somatic understanding of cognitive activity, one that understands human embodiment as crucial to knowledge. They believe that the body is the center of human cognitivity. According to them, the self is not a consciousness or mind existing independently of the body. The self is always to be understood as incarnated; it is the body-subject.<sup>34</sup> Human beings can know other people because they have living bodies with structures and functions similar to their own. According to Sorri and Gill, the body is not a neutral object in abstract space; it is one's way of being-in-the-world. External objects are also not mere neutral objects in abstract space, but they are endowed with their identity and significance in relation to the knowing body.<sup>35</sup> To know means to interact within the sense of acquiring knowledge through bodily participation. Knowledge does not come from exclusively mental activity, but comes as a result of interaction with the external world and the knower's embodied and active mind. All knowing takes place in embodied relationship.<sup>36</sup> Feminist knowing of truth stresses that the relation between mind and body is mutually constitutive rather than oppositional. Knowing is something embodied persons do. There is no knowledge apart from the

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<sup>34</sup> Sorri and Gill, 47-55.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 35-42.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 116-27.

knower. A knower is a human being who has a body. A human being is not a mind that exists independently of the body; a human is an embodied self.

Feminist theorists claim that human beings need to respect being female and the female body as a valid way of knowing and to respect being female as a method and technique for gathering and defining what can be or ought to be known.<sup>37</sup> Adrienne Rich sees herself as “an embodied female thinker,” and suggests that all women recognize themselves as embodied female thinkers. She rejects the dualism of Western thought and affirms both her mind and its creative capacities as well as her body and its creative capacities. Rich suggests that it is necessary to think through the body.<sup>38</sup> Women's embodied experiences create and form women's knowing. Women need, then, to trust their own knowledge of truth that comes through the body. Women must come to know themselves with the bypassed knowledge in their own bodies, not just in their minds.

Feminist theorists advocate that embodied knowing implies a certain relativity of truth. They do not insist that women's embodied knowledge is always absolute or objective truth. Human beings are embodied beings who live in specific racial, sexual, classical, and cultural contexts. Feminist theorists recognize that “knowers are always somewhere --and at once limited and enabled by the specificities of their locations.”<sup>39</sup> Their concrete embodiment as members of a specific race, class, gender, and culture plays a significant

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<sup>37</sup> Donna Wilshire, “The Uses of Myth, Image, and the Female Body in Revisioning Knowledge,” in *Gender/Body/Knowledge*, eds. Alison M. Jaggar and Susan R. Bordo (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1989), 108.

<sup>38</sup> Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1976), 39.

<sup>39</sup> Code, 39.

role in knowing the world. The human body and mind cannot be separated; they are interrelated to create and form human knowledge. Truth is always relative to our embodied understanding. Truth cannot be conceptualized in terms of completeness, transcendence, or objectivity. People can see the world “through shared, public eyes that are given to us by our embodiment, our history, our culture, our language, our interactions, etc.”<sup>40</sup> People have to acknowledge that their knowledge of truth is both historical and contextual. Women should not insist that their knowing is always valid and useful in all contexts. Truth is not a static quality but a process. Truth is established as “the result of an interactive process among embodied thinkers at work in a mutual world of things and persons.”<sup>41</sup> Women always need to reflect critically upon the process of validating knowledge and the criteria for establishing the validity of knowledge.

Feminist thinkers advise women to be sensitive to their epistemological limitations in understanding the truth by being sensitive to their own racial, cultural, economic, and social backgrounds. The wisdom and knowledge from people who have lived through their embodied experiences are more credible and believable than those who have merely read or thought about such experiences. Upper and middle-class women need to recognize their epistemological limitations and to learn wisdom and knowledge available through the embodied experiences of the poor. Uma Narayan says that the commitment to the contextual nature of knowledge permits arguing “that it is easier and more likely for the oppressed to have critical insights into the conditions of their own oppression than

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<sup>40</sup> Mark Johnson, *The Body in the Mind* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), xix.

<sup>41</sup> Sorri and Gill, 128.

it is for those who live outside these structures.”<sup>42</sup> White women should be aware of their benefits in this white-centered society and realize their epistemological limitations in knowing the suffering and wisdom of Black and minority women. Based on her own embodied experience as a Black woman, Patricia H. Collins insists that wisdom from living life gives high credence to Black women’s knowledge; knowledge about the dynamics of race, gender, and class oppression has been essential to Black women’s survival. Collins says,

Epistemological choices about who to trust, what to believe, and why something is true are not benign academic issues. Instead, these concerns tap the fundamental question of which versions of truth will prevail and shape thought and action.<sup>43</sup>

To know one’s limitations in knowing does not mean that one must distrust his or her own truth, or abandon all hope for understanding others’ truth. If people cannot share knowledge because of different life situation, they cannot communicate any truth. Because knowledge comes from experience, the best way to understand other women’s knowing is to share experiences and to develop empathy. Collins claims that essential components for sharing knowledge and validating truths are personal expressiveness, emotion, and empathy.<sup>44</sup> Each individual has her or his own ideas and feelings, but we need to understand the individual as a connected knower who develops ideas and knowledge through dialogue with others of a community.

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<sup>42</sup> Uma Narayan, “The Project of Feminist Epistemology: Perspectives from a Nonwestern Feminist,” in *Gender/Body/ Knowledge*, 264.

<sup>43</sup> Patricia H. Collins, *Black Feminist Thought* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1990), 202.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 215.

Feminist epistemology emphasizes human action for transforming reality. Knowing truth is not just cognitive knowledge of objects. Knowing comes from embodied experiences and action. Feminist epistemology emphasizes that knowing is not simply recognizing reality; it also includes action for transforming reality. Even though knowledge can be relativized, feminists resist any knowledge that perpetuates women's dehumanization. Women cannot accept misogynous knowledge or epistemologies, for example, because misogynous knowledge distorts women's nature and destroys women's humanity. According to Collins, Black women's embodied experiences and thinking can be fostered by creative acts of resistance. Collins claims that the significance of an Afrocentric feminist epistemology may lie in how such an epistemology increases understanding of how subordinated groups create knowledge that fosters resistance.<sup>45</sup> A legitimate epistemology makes it possible to see how knowledge is authorized and who is empowered by it. Women need to reject an unequal society in which some people have epistemological privilege and control over others. Linda Alcoff and Elizabeth Potter emphasize that "for feminists, the purpose of epistemology is not only to satisfy intellectual curiosity, but also to contribute to an emancipatory goal: the expansion of democracy in the production of knowledge."<sup>46</sup> Feminist thinkers provide a vision of society in which all people can participate in the process of knowing truth.

The subjects of knowing in feminist epistemology are primarily women. With diverse women's experiences and knowing, women need to find their own truth. In feminist

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 207.

<sup>46</sup> Linda Alcoff and Elizabeth Potter, "Introduction: When Feminisms Intersect Epistemology," in Feminist Epistemologies, 13.

thinking, all women are welcome to participate in the process of creating and forming the truth. Because of the diversity of women's lives, women should know their epistemological limitations as embodied beings in concrete racial, economic, social, and cultural contexts. No single woman or group can know the absolute truth for all women. It cannot be said that some women's knowing is more valuable and objective because their knowing reflects one's own life experiences. When women are opened to other's knowing, are self-reflective, and have a vision of "the expansion of democracy in the production of knowledge,"<sup>47</sup> women can participate in the process of knowing truth. When women are self-reflective and open to listen to other women's voices, women can participate in the process of knowing the truth together. As embodied beings in specific sexual, social, racial, classical, and cultural contexts, many women will constantly search for religious truth or ultimate truth. Women need to know that they know truth, not by denying their bodies and transcending bodily experience, but by developing the cognitive, creative and relational ability of their bodies. When each woman gets wisdom from her past experience, her own tradition, and her present embodied experiences, all women can share a richer vision of truth. When women have such a vision of truth, they can reject the oppressive and destructive knowledge that has devalued and harmed them.

### Women's Bodily Experiences in Feminist Psychology

Women's and men's life-span development are different due to their different bodily experiences. Women's bodily experiences, such as menstruation, pregnancy, and menopause, are rarely discussed by developmental theorists. In spite of the importance of

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 13.

the body to woman's identity and self-image, human developmental theories throughout the life cycle have seldom considered woman's bodily experiences and have often misinterpreted them. Male psychology has very often been taken to be the norm, and women's important life stages have not been fully studied or recognized. Feminist psychologists have developed new understandings of the female body, and reclaim the importance of women's bodily experiences to their psychological development. Since the 1960s, feminist psychologists have critiqued biased theoretical assumptions of male-centered psychology. They criticize prejudices and misunderstandings about women in psychological theories, and have found theoretical deficiencies in developmental psychological theories. They have also contributed theory and research to build knowledge about female psychology.<sup>48</sup>

Feminist psychologists advocate the importance of women's bodily experiences in their psychological development. Naomi Goldenberg suggests the use of psychoanalytic theory to gain insight into the physical nature of human thought. Total emphasis upon the physical environment is a gross departure from the major premises of psychoanalysis laid down by Freud.<sup>49</sup> In Freudian thought, all notions, all images, all fantasies, and all ideals have their sources in our bodies. According to Goldenberg,

Psychoanalysis has always moved with an understanding that bodily feelings and functions are only experienced in the context of particular bodies with particular

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<sup>48</sup> Mary F. Belenky, Blythe M. Clinchy, Nancy R. Goldberger and Jill M. Tarule, Women's Ways of Knowing; Carol Gilligan, In a Different Voice; Jean B. Miller, Toward a New Psychology of Women (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986); Nancy J. Chodorow, Feminism and Psychoanalytic Theory (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989).

<sup>49</sup> Naomi Goldenberg, Returning Words to Flesh (Boston: Beacon Press, 1990), 74.

histories. . . . The flesh is never in a literal present but is always living in past memories and future wishes. Flesh is forever desiring, forever imaging its desires, forever remembering its past.<sup>50</sup>

Mental phenomena are never disembodied; rather the body is the complex context of all experience. Human thoughts, ideas, and intellect are conditioned both by somatic drives and by the past physical and social contexts in which those drives were experienced.<sup>51</sup>

Each aspect of the mind--ego, id, and superego--is described as constituted in and through inner and outer experiences. Each is simultaneously psychic, somatic, object-related, and cultural-historical. The ego originally develops out of the id; it is foremost a "body-ego" and is not isolated from the superego. The superego itself is simultaneously biological and cultural; it is the "outcome" of both historical and biological factors. Because the concept of instinct is simultaneously psychic and somatic, it offers the possibility of overcoming the mind-body dualism.<sup>52</sup>

Women's life transitions are different from men's in terms of physiological particularities. Women experience constant and distinctive bodily changes associated with menstruation, conception, childbirth, nursing, and menopause. These experiences are combined with the female cultural role of caring for others. In a sexist society, women are devaluated by association with the body and nature, and men are overvalued by association with the mind and spirit. In a society in which women's bodily experiences are not valued and celebrated, women often have an inadequate and

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 112.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 179.

<sup>52</sup> Jane Flax, Thinking Fragments (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 58-61.



uncomfortable feeling about their bodies. Patriarchal society creates myths about the female body. Men and women develop very different attitudes toward their bodies and sexuality. While men develop pride in their bodily changes, women have negative feelings about their bodily maturity, such as menstruation, pregnancy, and the menopause. To reject a woman's body as negative and irrelevant for woman's selfhood is to fail to find power and gracefulness within her body.

Women's development is influenced greatly by their changing bodies. Penelope Washbourn emphasizes that women's search for psychological and spiritual wholeness goes through the particular life-crises of being a female body. For her, women's life stages such as menstruation, leaving home, sexual mutuality, love, failure and loss, marriage, pregnancy and birth, parenthood, menopause, and the anticipation of death, are not just psychological phases to be negotiated but turning points that raise fundamental religious questions.<sup>53</sup>

At birth, women experience nothingness and emptiness in this patriarchal society; males are the more valued sex. According to Carol P. Christ, women's experiences of nothingness begin at birth and continue throughout their lives. At a very young age, a girl is made to realize that she is not important, except in her relationships to boys and men. Young girls experience their mother's special attention and love of their brothers.<sup>54</sup> A mother's lack of self-love and respect as a woman also influences her daughter's self-image.

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<sup>53</sup> Penelope Washbourn, Becoming Woman (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), 2.

<sup>54</sup> Carol P. Christ, Diving Deep and Surfacing (Boston: Beacon Press, 1980), 15.

The onset of menstruation is the great first physiological transition to a new identity and self-image in women's lives. The experience of menstruation demands the creation of a new identity and self-image as a mature female. The traditional identity theorists, such as Erik Erikson, however, concentrate on identity development in men and preclude consideration of the importance of the onset of menstruation in a woman's self-identity development. Even though menarche should be a positive experience to celebrate, many young women feel shame. Menstruation may create the feeling of physical discomfort or serious pain. It may also give women feelings of shame and humiliation. The experience of menstruation, as associated with shame, guilt, and fear, is perceived as part of a learned response, affected by parental and cultural conditioning and the persistence of traditional religious taboos.<sup>55</sup>

The mother-daughter relationship is influential in the formation of the adolescent girl's perception of herself and her body. Because of their own internalization of the dominant ideology of the female body, many mothers socialize their daughters so as to restrict their developing sexuality, their changing bodies at the onset of menstruation.<sup>56</sup> Christine Downing shares her anger over her mother's negative response to her first menstrual period. However, she better understands her mother today after coming to realize how much her mother had suffered from premenstrual headaches and menstrual cramps.<sup>57</sup> The onset of menstruation is an important transitional point, either to celebrate

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<sup>55</sup> Washbourn, 7.

<sup>56</sup> Jane M. Ussher, The Psychology of the Female Body (London: Routledge, 1989), 34.

<sup>57</sup> Christian Downing, Women's Mysteries (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1992), 85-86.

women's creative power and mystical bodies, or to develop a negative self-image of women's bodies. There is a danger that women will develop an attitude of shame and distress about their bodies and fail to discover their potential in this patriarchal culture and religious tradition. It is important to note that some women tell stories about menstruation as a time for meditation on female body processes and as a time for spiritual quest and insight.<sup>58</sup>

Negative social constructions of menstruation have a harmful effect on women's self-image and identity. Historically, menstruating women have been isolated from men and children. Taboo and stereotypes surrounding menstruation isolate women from men and reinforce negative beliefs about gender difference. Today these often relate to what has come to be called "premenstrual syndrome" or "PMS." There is no agreement concerning the essential features of premenstrual syndrome. Jane M. Ussher says, "We do not need cyclical change to be defined as an illness."<sup>59</sup> According to her research, many women experience positive cyclical change. She points out that widespread acceptance of the premenstrual syndrome can cause women to be controlled and tied to their biology.<sup>60</sup> If women accepted the menstrual cycle as a normal part of the female experience, it would be easier for women to experience menstruation as a spiritually positive cyclical change. Ussher claims that "although menstruation or pregnancy may

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<sup>58</sup> Emily E. Culpepper, "Are Women's Bodies Sacred?: Listening to the Yes's and No's," in Sacred Dimensions of Women's Experience, ed. Elizabeth D. Gray (Wellesley, Mass.: Roundtable Press, 1988), 199.

<sup>59</sup> Ussher, 74.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 69.

have strong biological components, there is no biological basis for the myths and misconceptions which act to define women as inferior or second rate.”<sup>61</sup>

During puberty, women begin to have psychological conflict over the image of “the perfect female body.” A woman receives messages as follows:

Her body is her passport to happiness: it is through her body that she entices a man, which should be her main objective. This attitude reverberates throughout a woman’s life, resulting in constant worry over weight, appearance and a dissatisfaction with her body.<sup>62</sup>

Women’s body size and shape affect identity throughout the life cycle. In this society, women are expected to have slim and young bodies. The reality of female sexuality leads many young girls to respond to the ambiguity of the adolescent life-crisis by assuming a false identity. A young woman often defines her identity in terms of her sexual attractiveness, and she is not able to trust any other element of her personhood, either her physical, intellectual, or creative powers. Another inability to deal with a woman’s self-definition is to focus on her mind to the exclusion of her body.<sup>63</sup> Either way, women fail to discover their potential wholeness and develop a false self-image.

In a patriarchal society, women are objectified and dehumanized as sexual objects meant for men’s pleasure. Parents may fear that their adolescent daughter will become pregnant and may concentrate their attention on the negative consequences of an emerging sexuality, such as early pregnancy or loss of reputation. This fear influences many girls to believe that women’s sexuality is dangerous and must be surreptitious or

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 38.

<sup>63</sup> Washbourn, 25-28.

denied.<sup>64</sup> The responsibility of a woman for her body involves its procreative potential. Recognizing the vulnerability of a woman's body to pregnancy, women must always attend to issues of safety for their bodies and be aware of the power that can potentially control their bodies.

Lesbian women openly disclose many lies about a woman's body and sexuality in patriarchal and heterosexual society. According to lesbian psychological theory, sexuality is an aspect of identity that is fluid and dynamic as opposed to fixed and invariant. Lesbian protest against constricting social definitions of what a "real woman" is, because these have served to oppress women and limit the expression of their diverse potential.<sup>65</sup> Such definitions often reject any sexual pleasure or relationship that does not serve to enhance female identity and mutuality.

Many women enter into marriage with dreams of a happy family. Women need to have a new identity in relation to marriage. Marriage can represent the willingness of a woman to find in herself an openness to, and an understanding of, the particular elements of male experience that are also part of woman's life. Marriage offers men and women the time and trust to know the other and to reintegrate hidden aspects of one's self through encountering the other's sexuality.<sup>66</sup> Marriage can be a grace-filled experience; however, many women face difficulties in their marital relationship, and in childcare, house work and work schedules. Unlike men, women sometimes have to sustain both

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<sup>64</sup> Ussher, 27.

<sup>65</sup> Carla Golden, "Diversity and Variability in Women's Sexual Identities," in *Lesbian Psychologies*, ed. Boston Lesbian Psychologies Collective (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987), 33.

<sup>66</sup> Washbourn, 90.

children and occupation. Through their marriage, women constantly face conflicts between work, family and self. These conflicts lead women to experience contradictions, frustration, and hard, or even impossible, choices. Because of the complexities of their lives, women's understandings of reality are relational, and their decisions in life situations generally involve the relationships to which their lives are inextricably bound.

Many women see pregnancy and birth as one of the most mystical experiences in their lives. Yet, pregnancy and childbirth involves an identity crisis for a woman. She is challenged to formulate a new self-concept, a new understanding of herself in relation to her physiology, and a new view of the meaning of her fertility. Pregnancy and birth locate a woman in an experience of the body and a perception of the self that is uniquely female.<sup>67</sup> Women experience a being at one with an essential other. The pregnancy implies the end of the woman as a single unit, and the beginning of the mother-child relationship. Women often feel extremely ambivalent about the dramatic changes in their body shape and size. Women's pregnancy and childbirth can be a meaningful experience "if we conceive it not according to patriarchal ideas of childbirth as a kind of production, but as part of female experience."<sup>68</sup> Pregnancy and birth can be a mystical and joyful experience for a woman, but some women experience pain, loss of self, and violation. Many women still experience miscarriages, infant death, and even face their own death in childbirth. Childless women are often devalued and are seen as unnatural and unproductive in a patriarchal society. Women's experiences of pregnancy and childbirth

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<sup>67</sup> Washbourn, 94-95.

<sup>68</sup> Rich, 182.

should be validated as a normal and natural process of a woman's life cycle, but not necessary for all women; it can also be understood as a chance for changing one's self identity.

Many women choose to be a mother. Mothering, however, is not a simple and natural activity. The act of having a child is the beginning of a fundamental identity crisis in the life of a woman. A woman's interpretation of her identity as "a mother" reflects her need to redefine the meaning of the process of life and her role within it. In becoming a parent, there lies a potential for discovering growth and for realizing a more authentic form of human self-understanding as well as a clearer view of the nature and purpose of life.<sup>69</sup> Women customarily experience deep human bonding through taking care of their infant children. Women experience the complexities of their relationship in caring for themselves and their vulnerable babies. Women come to have a new perspective of self and world as a mother. Ussher argues that dominant ideology of pregnancy and childbirth contributes towards the constriction of women's lives, producing women as carers and nurturers, rather than as achievers or providers.<sup>70</sup> Because of these conflicts, pregnant women may have a sense of sadness or loss of self; however, society expects that the pregnant woman will be happy and glowing through the perpetuation of ideology and the myth of motherhood.<sup>71</sup> Even though many women experience anxiety, tiredness, and physical discomfort, they are prevented from expressing discontent because of the

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<sup>69</sup> Washbourn, 111-17.

<sup>70</sup> Ussher, 77.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 82.

socially constructed myth of the ideal mother. In a patriarchal society, women are compelled to complete self-sacrifice. Women's self-love is regarded as selfishness. Women feel guilty of self-caring. Many women subsequently fall into the dilemma of choosing between taking care of a baby and working outside the home. Usually men do not have to worry about a choice between childcare and work; however, women have difficulties dealing with the double responsibility. Ussher explains accurately about women's double-bind as mothers. If women stay home, they are likely to be isolated and dependent, liable to suffer alienation and depression. Conversely, if women go outside home to work, they have to maintain a job and still take the role of childcare and housework, compounded by guilt over not being at home for their children all the time.

Midlife crisis is a common woman's crisis. The hormonal changes that accompany menopause may cause varying degrees of difficult physiological symptoms. Menopause can be a particularly deep crisis for women who have devoted themselves exclusively to mothering. As a woman ages, she may feel that she is less physically attractive and less desirable, and that her reproductive and nurturant functions are no longer relevant. A woman may find it hard to accept her body's aging. Some women use creams to erase the lines of age, or they submit to cosmetic surgery to return to a more socially valued youthful appearance. As fertility and femininity are linked, menopausal women often experience the loss of their "femininity." Because of internalizing the negative social view of menopausal women as barren and useless, women experience physical discomfort as well as heightened negative psychological symptoms.<sup>72</sup> In sum, the loss of

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 104-09.



the reproductive capacity and other physical changes in menopause challenge women's self-value and their sense of life purpose.

Unlike the negative social view of menopause, many women feel free from childbearing and child rearing. They are freed to a new enjoyment of sex and a renewed dedication to their work. Menopause need not be a threat. Menopause can be a time for reassessing one's worth as a woman, as a unique individual; it is a time for realigning and rediscovering one's ultimate value in relation to the whole.<sup>73</sup> Women can look for new horizons during their menopausal years, and new ways of defining themselves.

Discovering a new sense of self can be a positive experience. As women get older, they need to be enjoying their new opportunities for integration, wholeness, and authenticity.

Each transitional period in women's lives offers a unique challenge. Women's bodily experiences, such as menarche, menstruation, pregnancy, childbirth, and menopause, can have profound effects on women's lives, their identity and self-conceptualization. However, women must not be confined by their reproductive role and the socially constructed myths of women's bodily experiences. Ussher claims that social beliefs and myths of women's bodies in a patriarchal society contribute to women's negative feelings of their bodily experiences. She challenges the concept of immutable, biological, pre-given categories, in which the female body is seen as a fixed entity that will influence women in predetermined ways.<sup>74</sup> Ussher argues that women's bodily experiences are both biological and social. She claims, "categories which we may assume are biological

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<sup>73</sup> Washbourn, 130-33.

<sup>74</sup> Ussher, 70.

givens or social constructions may not be straightforwardly either, but the result of a complex relationship of many different factors.”<sup>75</sup>

Women’s bodily experiences cannot be understood outside the social and political context of women’s lives. Women often experience obstacles that hinder their growth in a patriarchal society. Women’s bodily experiences have been exaggerated in negative ways or denied in patriarchal societies, and women experience difficulty in integrating their bodies with their self-concepts. To cope with these transitional periods, women need to trust their abilities and freedom to create new lives. Women need to experience their bodily changes as a natural and positive process and travel through these life stages without being overwhelmed by social conceptualizations of femininity. Women can use each transitional period as an opportunity for growth. With new body experiences, a woman can gradually discover a sense of self-respect and a belief in herself as a unique, creative, and powerful person leaving behind old personal and social self-images rooted in negative myths, bodily disgust, or even self-hatred.

### Conclusion

Feminist theorists in the areas of theology, epistemology, and psychology advocate the importance of women’s bodies and bodily experiences as central to women’s religious experiences, knowledge, and psychological development. They suggest feminist visions for understanding and developing embodied religious experience, embodied knowing and embodied human growth. Their feminist visions, however, have a tendency to idealize women’s embodied experiences as always creative and positive experiences. Women’s

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 71.

embodied experiences may not always nurture women's spiritual growth. Women's embodied experiences such as sexual abuse, domestic violence, or abortion may critically challenge women's spiritual growth. Without considering the painful realities of women's embodied experiences in our present patriarchal society, women cannot fully understand women's embodied spiritual growth.

Feminist theorists also tend to understand women's embodied experiences as ahistorical experiences. Women's embodied experiences are based on concrete socio-political, cultural, racial, and sexual contexts. Womanist and Asian theorists acknowledge the importance of the racial and cultural contexts of women's embodied experiences. Lesbians recognize the importance of sexual identity in women's embodied experiences. Feminist visions of women's embodied spiritual growth need to be shaped by diverse women's embodied experiences. Without considering women's concrete and diverse experiences, feminist understandings of women's embodied experiences can be ideal and ahistorical.

Feminist theorists provide important analysis and theory for religious educators; however, to develop a deeper understanding of women's bodily experiences and spiritual growth, Chapter 4 will explore the more specific subject of women's spiritual journeys and the empowerment of women in their embodied spiritual growth.

## CHAPTER 4

### Women's Bodily Experiences in Spiritual Growth

Adult women seldom become primary subjects of concern by religious educators, pastors, or caregivers, and spiritual growth of adult women is rarely mentioned in the Christian community. Spiritual growth or faith development is a life-long journey. Adult women need spiritual nurture and empowerment in the faith community appropriate to their age and stage of life. They face many new bodily experiences, such as marriage, sexuality, pregnancy, childbirth, mothering, and menopause, and these bodily experiences challenge or foster their own faith and spirituality. For the holistic spiritual growth of adult women, feminist educators, pastors, pastoral theologians and spiritual directors often do advocate the importance of women's bodily experiences in their spiritual growth. The work of these theorists is the focus of this chapter. The purpose is to identify insights in the literature of women's lived experience, and insights regarding the nurture and empowerment of women in their embodied spiritual growth.

#### Feminist Religious Education

Religious educators often focus attention on the human faith journey, seeking ways to understand and foster growth. However, women's bodily experience is often neglected. Feminist religious educators have begun to recognize the importance of bodily experiences in women's spiritual growth and to suggest feminist approaches to educational practice. They insist that an important task of religious education is to help women in the many seasons of their lives to integrate their bodily experiences with their spirituality.

Feminist religious educators often view women's faith experiences as an appropriate starting point for their teaching and learning. They reject the negative ideological association of women with sin or sexual temptation in Christian tradition, and advocate education for women's full humanization. Feminist religious educators further recognize that patriarchal Christian tradition does not nurture and empower women's embodied spiritual growth, but rather cultivates disembodied spiritual growth by denying the spiritual meaning of women's bodily experiences. According to Mary Elizabeth Moore, women are unwrapping cultural stereotypes that have held women in bondage to submissiveness, intuition, affection, and gentleness, as well as stereotypes that have held men in bondage to dominance, logic, cognition, and boldness; the effort is to ask new questions about human wholeness.<sup>1</sup> In dualistic thinking, women have been associated with socially less important values, and this association has been used to justify men's control over women, especially women's bodies and sexuality. Feminist religious education needs to help women to reject patriarchal beliefs in religious teachings, and to create new understandings of womanhood and authentic female experience.

Feminist religious educators reject as false the teachings of disembodied spirituality and stress the importance of bodily experiences in women's lives and spiritual growth. They challenge any disembodied spirituality that focuses on spirit without body. Kathleen Fischer claims that bodies have a tenacious memory of what has happened to us

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<sup>1</sup> Mary Elizabeth Mullino Moore, "Feminist Theology and Education," in *Theological Approaches to Christian Education*, eds. Jack L. Seymour and Donald E. Miller (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990), 71-72.

in the course of a day or a lifetime, how we have received and stored it. Bodies contain our fear and dread, joy and excitement.<sup>2</sup> The body is a center of our experiences.

Maria Harris criticizes faith development theory that focuses on “disembodied minds.” She advocates the inclusion of artistic knowing through bodiliness in faith development theory. Harris says, “Through and with our bodies, a knowing emerges which is the basis and ground for knowing other concrete beings and not just concepts and thought.”<sup>3</sup> Our meaning and knowing of reality emerge from our physical experiences and are conditioned by our bodily experiences. According to Harris, women’s spiritual awakening begins with an attentiveness to the marvelous and wonderful creation which is a woman’s body. In patriarchal cultures, however, women reject, resist, and rebel against the bodies that they are. Women are always in need of fixing, reshaping, and redoing their bodies. Dissatisfied with their bodies, they do not recognize the gifts that they are and have, and the possibilities that they might become.<sup>4</sup> Harris emphasizes that a woman’s task at the first step of spirituality is acceptance, appreciation, and love of her own body and sexuality.<sup>5</sup>

Feminist religious educators also encourage critical reflection upon present curricula in relation to women’s experiences and perspectives. Maria Harris points out the silence that exists in religious curriculum with regard to women. She identifies the silence about women, of women, by women, toward women in the explicit, implicit and null

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<sup>2</sup> Kathleen Fischer, Autumn Gospel (New York: Paulist Press, 1995), 90.

<sup>3</sup> Maria Harris, “Completion and Faith Development,” in Faith Development and Fowler, 120.

<sup>4</sup> Harris, Dance of the Spirit, 8-9.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

curriculum. With reference to the explicit curriculum, women's stories and experience as well as the research and writing done by women have been excluded from many curricular resources.<sup>6</sup> Examining the implicit and null curriculum is a more difficult to accomplish because null curriculum does not exist and refers to areas left out, ideas not addressed, concepts not offered.<sup>7</sup> Women's voices, especially voices of women of color, still remain mute and unheard in most curricula. Women need to examine critically what is omitted, both as content and as process in religious education curricula. That which is left out is tacitly considered unimportant.

One large part of the null curriculum is women's bodily experiences; these are rarely addressed in religious communities. Women need to reflect critically upon the present curriculum in their faith communities in the light of their embodied experiences. They need to reflect not only on the explicit curriculum, but also on the implicit and null curricula that do not deal with women's experiences. Women may raise the issue of how church teachings are shaped by men's assumptions, presuppositions, and experiences. Embodiment is a profoundly social reality. Feminist religious educators suggest that women break their silence, find their voices, and name their embodied experience. They suggest that women constantly question and uncover the explicit and implicit sexism in religious curricula.

Feminist religious educators also indicate that religious teachings have contributed to women's negative understanding of their bodies and sexuality. They recognize the

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<sup>6</sup> Maria Harris, Women and Teaching (New York: Paulist Press, 1988), 21.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 22-24.

responsibility of religious teaching for women's oppression and discrimination. Janet Tanaka insists that domestic violence and sexual abuse are reinforced by religious teachings that degrade women's nature.<sup>8</sup> Misunderstandings of women's bodies and sexuality are also harmful for women's spirituality. Tanaka suggests that women be helped to deal with questions of sexuality and sexual morality in an open, and frank manner that allows women to develop a reverence and respect for their bodies and for the bodies of others.<sup>9</sup> Judith A. Dorney proposes a critical reflection on the images of women that are represented in advertising, music, and poetry. She believes that advertising, music, and poetry are primary ways by which women are defined in society.<sup>10</sup> Religious educators need constantly to observe and reevaluate their teachings in relation to women's experiences and reality, as well as be proactive in analyzing reality.

Feminist religious educators understand women's spiritual growth as a rhythmic and circular process rather than as a series of hierarchal stages. Women may understand their embodied spiritual growth like their bodily rhythms. Harris uses the metaphor of dance to express the rhythmic process of women's teaching and spirituality. The sequence that she presents in Dance of the Spirit has seven steps: awakening, discovering, creating,

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<sup>8</sup> Janet Tanaka, "The Role of Religious Education in Preventing Sexual and Domestic Violence, in Women's Issues in Religious Education, ed. Fern M. Giltner (Birmingham: Religious Education Press, 1985), 83.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 105.

<sup>10</sup> Judith A. Dorney, "Religious Education and the Development of Young Women," in Women's Issues in Religious Education, ed. Fern M. Giltner (Birmingham: Religious Education Press, 1985), 54.



dwelling, nourishing, traditioning, and transforming.<sup>11</sup> These steps are a never-ending rhythm. She considers each step or theme as generating, or giving birth to the next.<sup>12</sup>

Feminist religious educators have developed new understandings or metaphors of teaching and learning. Some of them compare teaching to birthing. According to Harris, birthing tells women that they bear bodiliness, enfleshment, new life, passion, emotion, feeling, blood, water, and pain. Birthing also tells women that they bear responsibility for themselves, for other selves, and for the young, the animals and the earth.<sup>13</sup> Margaret Guenther similarly describes the teacher or spiritual director as a midwife, and teaching as a birthing process. The midwife assists the birthing process as a natural event. Unlike the physician, she does not deal with sickness or pathology, and does not use drugs to cover pain. Under her guidance, the birthing is a humane process, based on sympathetic human contact throughout.<sup>14</sup> Like the midwife who waits for the rhythmic contractions of the birthgiver, the educator or spiritual director needs “to do a great deal of waiting and encourages others to wait, not always in comfort and sometimes in great pain”<sup>15</sup> as a midwife of the spirit. Pregnancy and childbirth are helpful models to understand the role of teacher or spiritual director and the teaching process.

Women’s bodily experiences can teach all people how to create new life, truth, and vision. Like childbirth with a midwife, the teacher needs to help women experience their

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<sup>11</sup> Harris, *Dance of the Spirit*, xii-xiii.

<sup>12</sup> Harris, *Women and Teaching*, 14-15.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 86-87.

<sup>14</sup> Margaret Guenther, *Holy Listening* (Cambridge, Mass.: Cowley Publications, 1992), 87.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 95.

cyclic events as natural human processes. It is important to discern the truths of their bodily experiences without the negative influence of patriarchal beliefs. Women go through small or great, anticipated or unanticipated, welcome or unwelcome, transitions. Educators or directors may wait for transitional times with women, help them to name the transitions, and accept the transitional times as opportunities for growth and change.

Feminist religious educators further suggest that women exercise spiritual practices to foster the integration of their bodies and spirits, and to nurture their embodied spiritual growth. Maria Harris provides diverse spiritual disciplines for awakening, discovering, creating, dwelling, nourishing, traditioning, and transforming women's embodied spiritual growth. Spiritual practices include praying, contemplating, breathing, mourning, imagining, drawing, dancing, and celebrating.<sup>16</sup> Kathleen Fischer also provides diverse spiritual practices and exercises such as story-telling, journal exercise, prayer and reflection, and rituals.<sup>17</sup> Women can practice spiritual disciplines daily to awaken from their disembodied spirituality and to discover, create, dwell and nourish their embodied spirituality. They also need to pass on their embodied spirituality to their sisters and daughters, and to transform the entire Christian tradition.

For feminist religious educators, ritual is a very important educational method to affirm and to celebrate women's embodied spiritual growth. Ritual helps women "re-view the lives of others and incorporate them into ours; we rediscover unspoken words

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<sup>16</sup> In her book, Dance of the Spirit, Maria Harris provides diverse spiritual practices of each step of spiritual dance.

<sup>17</sup> Fischer, Women at the Well.

and allow them to speak to us."<sup>18</sup> In women's rituals, new symbols, images, and myths for empowering and nurturing women's embodied spiritual growth can be imagined and created. Women's rituals can also be profoundly important for the healing of women's spiritual and physical brokenness.

Feminist religious educators emphasize women's community as essential to realizing women's embodied spiritual growth. Women can remember their past experiences, share present experiences and dream for the future together in women's faith community. Harris suggests "communal remembering." For Harris, remembering is a pedagogical task that is directed toward the unrepresented and the underrepresented in their teaching and impels them to incorporate into their teaching not only other human beings, but also the earth itself.<sup>19</sup> To reject patriarchal teachings in faith community and to collect women's voices in their faith community, women need to support each other to find their authentic voices.

In summary, some major themes emerge in feminist religious education literature. Women's bodily experiences have been silenced in the explicit, implicit, and null curriculum in the faith community. In spite of the importance of women's bodily experiences to spiritual growth, these experiences have been suppressed or denied in Christian teachings. Feminist religious educators have begun to advocate a new understanding of women's authentic experiences, especially women's embodied experiences. They suggest a critical reflection upon present curricula in faith community

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<sup>18</sup> Harris, *Women and Teaching*, 43.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 40-41.

and active participation in the process of creating a curriculum and the educational environment. They also advise a new understanding of teaching and learning that can empower and nurture women's full humanization and embodied spiritual growth. They propose the creation of women's community in which women can share their authentic voices and create women's rituals to celebrate women's creative power in their life transitions.

### Feminist Pastoral Theology and Care

Feminist pastoral theologians increasingly advocate for the importance of bodily experiences in women's spiritual lives, suggesting pastoral care and counseling for women in transitional periods, especially related to bodily changes. They also give special attention to women in spiritual crises due to sexual violence, domestic violence, abortion, infertility, or miscarriage.

Feminist pastoral counselors and theologians emphasize the importance of women's body images for healthy spiritual growth. Young developing girls adapt to significant changes in their body images and functioning. Because of cultural biases about a woman's body and sexuality, many women do not know how to care for their physical bodies or to accept their bodily changes positively. According to Carroll Saussy, unconstructive criticism of a child's body is an evil that can destroy a child's faith in her or his true self and weaken resistance to physical, sexual abuse.<sup>20</sup> Negative attitudes toward the female body show up early in a young girl's life, and these negative messages

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<sup>20</sup> Carroll Saussy, "Pastoral Care and Counseling and Issues of Self-Esteem," in Clinical Handbook of Pastoral Counseling, eds. Robert J. Wicks and Richard D. Parsons, vol. 2 (New York: Paulist Press, 1993), 381.

cause the girl to have a negative image of her body and authentic self. These cultural messages make women more vulnerable to physical and sexual abuse. In this patriarchal society, women's worth is defined by men, usually based upon bodily appearances. Social images of the "perfect woman's body" cause women to be overly concerned with weight and bodily proportion. A thin body is sought without concern for health maintenance. By tying women's self-esteem to a scale, thinness is valued more than the woman herself. In this society, being thin is the only way for women to be valued and successful, and thinness is often achieved through radical means that include extensive cosmetic surgery, eating disorders, over-exercising, and malnutrition.<sup>21</sup> Eating disorders are very difficult to treat because of complex psychosocial issues, including low self-esteem, shame, guilt, anger, rage, incongruent beliefs regarding self and food, body image distortion, mind/body dualism, peer pressure, and social expectation. A woman with an eating disorder does not really know much about hunger, and the body is seen as something foreign that must be controlled.<sup>22</sup> Pastoral caregivers need to assist women to understand themselves as a whole self and to discover their own beauty and new ways of caring for themselves.

Feminist pastoral caregivers are trying to change negative thinking about women's bodily experiences in the Christian community and to cultivate the creative and positive power of women's life transitions. They suggest that women be involved in more thoughtful personal planning and self-care through the experiences of menstruation,

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<sup>21</sup> Jane E. Dasher, "Manna in the Desert: Eating Disorders and Pastoral Care," in Through the Eyes of Women, ed. Jeanne S. Moessner (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 182.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 183-89.

pregnancy, delivery, and lactation.<sup>23</sup> Pastoral caregivers are also urged to accept and integrate the rhythmicity and the creative cycles of menstruation, pregnancy, and childbirth, and to help women experience these transitional times as spiritual moments. Spiritual leaders can teach women meditation and relaxation techniques. Women may discover their divine creativity through these bodily experiences.

Feminist pastoral theologians have also been concerned about women's searching for their authentic sexuality and for mutual and interdependent relationships. In the church, the mention of sexuality has been a taboo. Silence in the area of sexuality often hurts women, and maintains the oppression and pain of women.<sup>24</sup> Sexuality means more than how persons engage in physical relationships. Joretta L. Marshall indicates that "a broader understanding of sexuality connects it with perceptions and self-awareness as embodied and engendered beings, of core values and beliefs about what it means to be bodyselves, and of the manner in which persons yearn and seek communion with others."<sup>25</sup> Marshall maintains that the emphasis in pastoral care should not be on the activity of "sex" but on the meaning that women bring to various experiences of communion and intimacy, including those which are spiritual, emotional, physical, and sexual.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Maxine Glaz, "A New Pastoral Understanding of Women," in Women in Travail and Transition, eds. Maxine Glaz and Jeanne S. Moessner (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 22.

<sup>24</sup> Carolyn S. Bohler, "Female-Friendly Pastoral Care," in Through the Eyes of Women, 45-46.

<sup>25</sup> Joretta L. Marshall, "Sexual Identity and Pastoral Concerns: Caring with Women Who are Developing Lesbian Identities," in Through the Eyes of Women, 144.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 146.

Lesbian women especially have a hard time discerning their sexual orientation and identity within a social context that does not welcome lesbians. “Coming-out” as a lesbian is usually difficult and painful process, both personally and socially. A woman may encounter “a lack of support, loss of close friends, family rejections, loss of job, or loss of a possible romantic relationship.”<sup>27</sup> However, the church has not been a healthy place for lesbians. In fact, it can be devastating. Few churches have offered a place for lesbians to be open about their relationships and commitments. Many pastoral caregivers misunderstand homosexuality as only being about the way persons engage in the physical activity of “sex.” Lesbianism is more than sexual activity. Sexual orientation is experienced as a lifestyle that is all-encompassing, whether a person is gay, straight, or bisexual.<sup>28</sup> The role of the pastoral caregiver is to encourage women to move through the process of self-discovery toward self-identity, arriving at new levels of integration along the way.<sup>29</sup> Pastoral caregivers or clergy may help women to discern their authentic sexual identity and to develop mutual and interdependent relationships with their partners.

Feminist pastoral theologians suggest further the need for theological reflection and new approaches to pastoral care in relation to women’s maternal identification. Maternal identification is uniquely a woman’s experience. Whether or not a woman has children, motherhood represents the capacity for loving perseverance and the fostering of

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<sup>27</sup> Gail L. Unterberger, “Counseling Lesbians: A Feminist Perspective,” in Clinical Handbook of Pastoral Counseling, 2: 251.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 2: 247.

<sup>29</sup> Marshall, 151.

development in the service of the maternal ego ideal.<sup>30</sup> Mothering requires of women endless caring and sacrificing. Many working mothers face the same questions of child care, working schedule, housework, and marital arrangement. Because of the conflicts between and among their many roles, women often face contradictions, frustration, hard choices, and physical fatigue. According to Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore, “modern women fall prey to two impulses: not only collusion with limited definitions of womanhood but also imitation of the patriarchal ideals of adulthood.”<sup>31</sup> She thinks that Christian ideals of motherly self-sacrifice and fatherly hard work not only fail the lives of many people today, but misrepresent both the intent of God’s creation and the promise of the gospel message itself.<sup>32</sup> She suggests a transformation of the social structures and ideas that divide the burdens and rewards of family and work along gender lines and a reclaiming of the values of caring labor for both men and women. A pastoral caregiver or clergy person may help community members to learn shared parenting and housework. Women need to learn how to care for themselves and to create the time and space to nurture their own spirituality; this is important in caring for others as well as caring for oneself.

Pastoral caregivers need sensitively to care for women who suffer diseases of the reproductive system. Infertile women sometimes have strong feelings, such as rage, loneliness, and depression. In patriarchal societies, it is not easy to accept and affirm

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<sup>30</sup> Glaz, 22.

<sup>31</sup> Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore, “Women Who Work and Love: Caught between Cultures,” in Women in Travail and Transition, 69.

<sup>32</sup> Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore, Also A Mother (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 20.



women beyond their reproductive function. Pastoral caregivers may help women by inviting them to express their feelings.<sup>33</sup> Women who experience miscarriage or infertility want spiritual care and support from within their faith community. Pastoral caregivers or clergy can help women to share their pain, give expression to anger, and interpret their experience. In this society that defines women in terms of their reproductive ability, menopause can also be a very challenging experience for women. Some women feel unworthy, lonely, insecure or depressed. Clergy or spiritual directors need to be more sensitive to the complexity of women's physiological and emotional changes during menopause. They can empower women to address mid-life issues with honesty and openness in a supportive context, to engage in creative activities, and to see themselves as not ultimately a function of their biology.<sup>34</sup>

Feminist pastoral theology and care has been especially concerned about women whose lives are threatened by violence and devalued by negative stereotypes. Feminist caregivers have tried to understand the reality of women's lives within patriarchy, and to offer healing and empowerment to women. Even though many women suffer from sexual violence, the patriarchal Christian community rarely provides care or a healing ministry for such violence. Although survivors of sexual and domestic violence continue the search for a life-sustaining spirituality, the church and its theology may seem to be more a hindrance than an asset.<sup>35</sup> Childhood sexual abuse is one of the most important

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<sup>33</sup> Mary James Dean and Mary Louise Cullen, "Woman's Body: Spiritual Needs and Theological Presence," in Women in Travail and Transition, 92-94.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 89-91.

<sup>35</sup> Nancy J. Ramsay, "Sexual Abuse and Shame: The Travail of Recovery," in Women in Travail and Transition, 119.

but neglected issues in Christian community. Sexual abuse instills guilt, shame, fear of intimacy, depression, social isolation, alienation from God, negative body image, and a traumatic coping style in the victim.<sup>36</sup> The destructive experience of sexual abuse makes women feel shame about their bodies and their selves. One of the coping styles of those who were sexually abused is a form of dissociation by “leaving the body” so that the abuse happens to the body but not to the mind; but this coping mechanism does not make victims healthy.<sup>37</sup> During this life crisis, pastoral listening to the complex feelings of women is vitally important. Pastors or caregivers must allow the anger or rage to be expressed and to validate it. Women victims may express deep ambivalence and anger with God for leaving them unprotected. Pastors or caregivers can provide images of God’s connectedness and presence in the midst of human pain, fear, and struggle, in order to help women experience God’s transforming and empowering love.<sup>38</sup>

The battered women also need special pastoral care. Many women are brutally beaten by their husbands or boyfriends. With each beating, the woman’s self-esteem as well as her body is beaten. The battered woman remains bound by feelings of self-blame and guilt. Because the battered woman’s values are socially constructed by male beliefs and patriarchal dominance, she is kept in every way in her abusive bondage.<sup>39</sup> The battered woman needs the pastoral care provider to listen, to understand, and to believe her. The

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<sup>36</sup> Sharon E. Cheston, “Counseling Adult Survivors of Childhood Sexual Abuse,” in Clinical Handbook of Pastoral Counseling, 2: 455.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 456-57.

<sup>38</sup> Ramsay, 119-20.

<sup>39</sup> Joann M. Garma, “A Cry of Anguish: The Battered Woman,” in Women in Travail and Transition, 133.

battered woman's basic need is empowerment, both personally and within the church. To empower a battered woman is to assist her to free herself from the bondage of an abusive relationship, and to help her see herself as a person of value and worth.<sup>40</sup> A supportive pastoral and theological presence is critically important throughout physical and emotional crises. Women do not want advice or judgment, theological platitudes, or simplistic reassurances. Women want a theological and pastoral presence--someone who takes time to share their spiritual journeys, with the joys and pains, someone who really attends to their stories, provides a hand to hold, and brings a promise of transforming hope.<sup>41</sup>

Women of color advocate "womanistcare" for minority women.<sup>42</sup> Women of color suffer from social stereotypes. They are a triple minority in racist, classist, and patriarchal social systems. Skin color is an important determinant in life experience in the United States. Women of color experience racism, identity conflict, oppression, and colonialism within a white dominant culture. Many women of color experience conflicts which lead to diminished self-esteem, depression, worthlessness, stress reactions, anxiety, and psychosomatic disorders; yet, these women can hardly find an appropriate and caring place and system. The historical and conceptual critique of images ascribed to women of color is important to the activity of pastoral care. For example, images of black women as whores or as sexually aggressive support the denigration of black women, reinforcing

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 136.

<sup>41</sup> Dean and Cullen, 104.

<sup>42</sup> Linda H. Hollies, ed. WomanistCare (Joliet, Ill.: Woman to Woman Ministries, 1991).

the social, political, and interpersonal sexism toward them.<sup>43</sup> Teresa E. Snorton suggests that the pastoral relationship with women of color needs to move beyond the “controlling images” of culture and society to an engagement with the soul of the woman whose very life has been shaped, hampered, hindered, and impacted on every level by those same images.<sup>44</sup> Womanistcare focuses on the long neglected needs of African-American women, “needs of being restored, needs of being loved, needs of being validated, needs of being acknowledged, needs of being respected.”<sup>45</sup>

One of the important characteristics of womanistcare is soul care. For African-American women, soul care is a developmental process through which special things are done in cooperation with God through the life given us in the new birth. Pastoral ministers need to deal not only with the body and mind, but with the soul-- the eternal existence of humankind.<sup>46</sup> Womanistcare is concerned with the wholistic care of the mind, body, and spirit. Womanist caregivers want to help women of color claim their uniqueness, their specialness, the goodness implied in God’s creation for them, in spite of their incompleteness, flaws, imperfections or societal ideals.<sup>47</sup>

Womanist counselors recognize themselves as friends, co-workers, or family members in walking with women toward full humanization and freedom. Womanist caregivers have the

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<sup>43</sup> Teresa E. Snorton, “The Legacy of the African-American Matriarch: New Perspectives for Pastoral Care,” in Through the Eyes of Women, 52.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 63.

<sup>45</sup> Eleanor L. Miller, “The Challenge of WomanistCare,” in WomanistCare, 24.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>47</sup> Delois Brown Daniels, “Wholeness for Care Givers,” in WomanistCare, 93.

hope of black women's friendship as an important pastoral care tool. Jerri E. Bender Harrison mentions some responsibilities of counselors: establish an atmosphere of trust; be an enabler of spiritual wholeness throughout the life cycle; raise diagnostic questions regarding spiritual issues and the need for spiritual growth; be with a person in the midst of her pain; survey one's needs and issues; and learn how to engage a person spiritually, helping them find part or all of their story in the stories of the Bible.<sup>48</sup> In a caring context, women of color can empower one another to spiritual growth and wholeness. In their friendship, women of color take responsibility for the other's spiritual growth.

A primary principle of feminist counseling is an awareness of patriarchy as a fundamental dynamic in the formation of women's distress. In a male-dominated culture, women have low self-esteem, which is at the root of many psychological problems.<sup>49</sup> Carroll Saussy insists that "any denigration of a female body or of female gender is a form of sexual abuse."<sup>50</sup> She expands the meaning of "sexual abuse," and claims that all sexism is intrinsically sexual abuse. The control of a woman's body and the false ideology about a woman's appearance in patriarchal society are destructive to a woman's spiritual journey. An important role of pastoral counselors and caregivers is to empower women to become aware of their environment and to transform destructive patriarchy. Feminist therapists are aware of the fact that "there are no individual solutions for social,

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<sup>48</sup> Jerri E. Bender Harrison, "WomanistCare: Liberation and Responsibility," in WomanistCare, 81-3.

<sup>49</sup> Mary E. Donovan and Linda Sanford, Women and Self-Esteem (New York: Penguin Books, 1984), xiv.

<sup>50</sup> Saussy, 381.

moral, and political problems that are at the root of her clients' distress."<sup>51</sup> Pastoral caregivers need to encourage women to become involved in social action and to express their anger in productive ways. Pastoral counselors need to be careful not to encourage women to adapt to an unhealthy environment. Women need to resist social stereotypes, and to reclaim their own beauty and living wisdom. Kathleen Greider advocates that constructive aggressiveness, even militancy, is sometimes necessary, not only as an expression of psychological self-esteem, but of spiritual "faith-esteem," making persons more able to stand by their prayerfully-considered beliefs.<sup>52</sup> Pastoral caregivers have to foster a woman's self-esteem and confidence in her personal power for bringing out social change.

Pastoral caregivers need to develop a new way of pastoral care for women in the midst of life transitions or crucial life problems. Patriarchal beliefs about women's bodies and sexuality have hindered women's embodied spiritual growth. Feminist pastoral care requires a deep awareness of how it is to be a woman in our current culture. It further requires naming cultural assumptions or biases for females. Pastoral caregivers need to help women discern their own beauty and the wisdom of their bodies, and to accept each transitional time as an opportunity for spiritual growth. They may support women with both a theological and pastoral presence, especially by hearing women's voices and sharing their feelings. Counselors or caregivers need to develop collaborative

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<sup>51</sup> Oliva M. Espin, "Feminist Approaches," in Women of Color, eds. Lillian Comas-Diaz and Beverly Greene (New York: Guilford Press, 1994), 283.

<sup>52</sup> Kathleen J. Greider, "Too Militant? Aggression, Gender, and the Construction of Justice," in Through the Eyes of Women, 137.

relationships with women. A dominant-submissive relationship may reinforce the powerlessness of women. Feminist pastoral counselors may also help women develop supportive networks of peers and community, as well as more adequate social, emotional, and spiritual supports in their lives.

### Feminist Spirituality

Feminist scholars and spiritual directors who are concerned with women's spirituality claim that women's spirituality must be truly holistic, and that their spiritual growth needs to be an embodied growth into full human maturity. Christian feminists challenge traditional concepts of spirituality equated with ascetic living within a religious community detached from the world. In this tradition, women are considered tempters, and their bodies are considered evil, real obstacles to a true spiritual life. By denying the worth of the body and sexuality, they denied the maturing growth of everyday experiences. Feminist spiritual directors reclaim the importance of women's bodily experiences in their spiritual journey, and suggest spiritual disciplines that can exercise women's embodied power.

Traditionally, spirituality is often conceived as apart from the world and body, especially the female body. Spirituality often has been identified simply with asceticism and mysticism or with virtue and methods of prayer. Models of spiritual holiness and perfection have often been built around the rejection of, or utter contempt for, the female body.<sup>53</sup> Women have often been considered spiritually inferior and incapable of the same spiritual attainment as men. The mind/body split in Western culture relegates emotions

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<sup>53</sup> King, Women and Spirituality, 92.

and body to women, rationality and spirit to men. Many women are uncomfortable with their bodies, and they deny or repress their bodily experiences and sexuality. A woman's body has often been the object of male desire, fascination, and fear. Widespread violence against women can be linked to ideas deeply rooted in Christian ethos, especially the idea that female sexuality is evil. Christianity denigrates female sexuality as lust, socially valuing only its procreative function.

Feminist spiritual directors have begun to look critically at "a body-denying, overly methodical, highly verbal and intellectual, muscular, vertical, conquering model of the spiritual life."<sup>54</sup> Joann Wolski Conn insists that "Christian spirituality includes every dimension of human life because God, Jesus, and the Spirit are experienced through body-community-history-influenced human life and symbols."<sup>55</sup> Thus, Christian spiritual development is not simply soul development, but total human development; women's spiritual growth cannot be separated from human development. To understand women's spiritual growth adequately, women must reexamine presuppositions about human development and construct a new understanding of mature humanity. Spiritual growth should be understood in a more holistic way, including not only belief, trust, commitment, and action, but also physical, emotional, imaginative, and aesthetic powers within women.

Feminist spiritual directors challenge dualistic ideas about body and soul; they reclaim the importance of women's embodied experiences as a primary source of self-image,

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<sup>54</sup> Sandra M. Schneiders, "The Effects of Women's Experience on Their Spirituality," in Women's Spirituality, ed. Joann Wolski Conn (New York: Paulist Press, 1986), 40.

<sup>55</sup> Joann Wolski Conn, "Women's Spirituality: Restriction and Reconstruction," in Women's Spirituality, 10.



identity, and spiritual growth. One goal of women's spiritual maturity is "to experience themselves as body/spirit unities and to view their bodies as holy and an avenue to the sacred."<sup>56</sup> Women's bodily experiences are central to their spiritual growth. When women are fully in touch with the experience of their own bodies, they can reclaim the embodiedness of all human experience and the sacredness of women's bodies and sexuality. Dualistic beliefs hinder women's holistic spiritual growth. Beyond all dualism, feminist women intend to secure "new religious and spiritual developments which affirm the resacralization of nature, the earth, the body, sexuality, and the celebration of the bonds of community."<sup>57</sup> By overcoming dualistic thinking, women can affirm an integral spirituality that leads to a true spiritual wholeness.

Feminists advocate the importance of women's bodily experiences in women's spiritual questing and yearning. According to Carol P. Christ, women experience emptiness and nothingness from the moment of birth because of social preference for a son. Many little girls get negative messages about being female, receive less concern and lower expectations than boys from parents and teachers, and are less fully nurtured toward their potential for growth and development.<sup>58</sup> As a woman grows, she internalizes her feelings of inferiority and self-hatred. Christ believes that the mystical experiences of a woman's body, such as menstruation, pregnancy, childbirth, and mothering, can spiritually awaken a woman from destructive patriarchal beliefs. Women's experiences

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<sup>56</sup> Fischer, Women at the Well, 39.

<sup>57</sup> King, 224.

<sup>58</sup> Christ, Diving Deep and Surfacing, 13-15.

of birth, death, illness, joy, grief, pain, and pleasure provide an opportunity to gain insight into the new meaning and value of life. For Christ, awakening is followed by a new naming of self and reality that articulates a new orientation to self and world, achieved through experiencing the powers of being.<sup>59</sup> According to Christ, learning to value everything about being a woman is a key theme in women's new naming. Women need to name the beauty and strength of their bodies. They may learn to value the life-giving potential of their monthly bleeding and to celebrate their body's connections to nature. Women may learn to overcome the false naming and devaluing of traditional women's activities, such as mothering and nurturing.<sup>60</sup> By awakening from self-hatred and self-negation, women can affirm and celebrate their bodies and powers and nurture their embodied spirituality.

Women's bodily experiences, often understood in negative ways in the Christian tradition, are usually interpreted in positive ways by feminists. Women's bodily experiences, such as menstruation, pregnancy, childbirth, sexuality, mothering, and menopause, are understood as sources for women's spiritual growth. Patriarchal religion has denigrated women's birthing experience as unimportant, and women's reproductive blood--the blood of birthing and menstruating--has been understood as polluting sacred spaces.<sup>61</sup> Pregnancy and childbirth are no longer understood as passive experiences to be

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 24.

<sup>61</sup> Elizabeth D. Gray, ed. Sacred Dimensions of Women's Experience (Wellesley, Mass.: Roundtable Press, 1988), 48.

endured by women. Rather women can begin to celebrate them as active processes, creating and shaping them for spiritual growth and transformation.<sup>62</sup>

Even though feminist spiritual directors emphasize the importance of women's bodily experiences in their spiritual journeys, they do not insist upon a biological determination. Women need to distinguish authentic embodied experience from the inaccurate stereotypes of women's bodily experiences as they have been filtered and biased by patriarchal beliefs. Ursula King points out that, traditionally, the role of woman was overridingly determined by her biological function as a child-bearer and mother. Women are no longer restricted to being primarily wives and mothers, although many women will continue to be wives and mothers, just as men will continue to be husbands and fathers; these roles will stand alongside many other roles in private and public life.<sup>63</sup> Many feminist women are also beginning to recognize the woman's life cycle as a source of pride and spiritual strength. To find sacredness, women go toward that reality-- toward bodies, nature, food, dust, and transitory moments--rather than distancing or withdrawing themselves from the reality of life.<sup>64</sup> Thus, to understand women's spiritual maturity, it is necessary to understand women's bodily experiences within a concrete historical and cultural context.

Feminist spiritual directors understand women's spiritual growth as either a circular or a spiral path. The cyclic form of women's lives can make women refuse to build a

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<sup>62</sup> King, 75.

<sup>63</sup> King, 76.

<sup>64</sup> Gray, 2.

hierarchical structure of spiritual growth. Women know these cyclic forms because of the cyclic process of their life experiences such as menstruation and childbirth. Theresa K. O'Brien insists that the human life itself is cyclic; therefore, the human search for spirituality, or true self, cannot be a straight path. For O'Brien, the spiral is nature's own form; nature, in its seasons of conception, birth, maturation, and death is cyclic.<sup>65</sup> For women, the spiral is an apt symbol because women experience the rhythms of life and growth and death in their bodies. Month after month, following an internal lunar clock, women actualize in their bodies the circle of building up and tearing down, of preparation and cleansing away. Whether or not women actually give birth, women are linked to their mothers and grandmothers and great-grandmothers in the endless cycle of nurturance, the rituals of caring for the sick, and the mysteries of the dying.<sup>66</sup> O'Brien describes how women follow the spiral path throughout life. On life's spiral, individuals return again and again to the same situation, seeing it slightly altered each time until finally they grasp its full meaning.<sup>67</sup>

Women's spiritual growth is repeated countless times through new bodily experiences and relationships with other beings. Through life transitions, women live in lifelong tension between integration and destruction. Women move back and forth in their struggle toward a mature spirituality. Many women recognize that the spiritual path is not an easy or smooth process. The path is often long and convoluted. Life crises, such

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<sup>65</sup> Theresa King O'Brien, "The Spiral Path," in *The Spiral Path*, ed. Theresa King O'Brien (St. Paul, Minn.: Yes International Publishers, 1987), 4.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 6.

as abortion, rape, miscarriage, and divorce, can destroy a woman's spirituality through pain and suffering. Women, however, learn the nature of their vulnerability as well as creativity as they move through each transitional period. When women make each transition in life's circular process, they have an opportunity to become more creative and mature. As women have the image and vision of women's full humanization and maturity, they begin to challenge the old image of self, others, and the world, and transform their lives toward a more mature spirituality. Through their life experiences, women may develop a deeper and more mature spirituality.

Based on their own embodied spiritual experiences, women may become advocates for a new understanding of spiritual maturity. According to Ursula King, women develop qualities of gentleness, tenderness, insight, compassion, and linking people together because a woman's body creates and cradles life in a way that a man's body does not. Women's lives are more organically interconnected to the lives of others. Women's specific experiences can contribute valuable insight for transforming the dominant values of contemporary culture.<sup>68</sup> By changing the present understanding of human growth and maturity, women and men can develop new aspects of tenderness and care, and both can participate in rearing and caring for children. By cultivating women's values and insights, such as care, concern, compassion for others, and reverence for life, both men and women can work together to transform the world.

Feminist spiritual directors suggest spiritual disciplines to awaken women from their social situation of silence and exercise their creative power and wisdom. For women's

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<sup>68</sup> King, 73.

spiritual discipline, ritual is central. In present faith communities or churches, women rarely have rituals to celebrate their bodily experiences or transitions. There are many rituals for a newborn baby, as seen in baptism and other rites of initiation, but the actual experience of the biological mother is rarely celebrated ritually in the faith community. Menstruation, pregnancy, and menopause are rarely even mentioned or celebrated in faith communities. In women's rituals, women can name, validate, and create their embodied experiences. Through ritual, women can gain a confidence in their own bodies and can act on their feelings and values. Women's rituals make possible a new naming of women's power, women's bodies, women's feelings of connection to nature, and women's bonds with each other. In childbirth rituals, women can honor new life and help a new mother to integrate the event into her life. Rituals also can support interdependence and communion with other women, and help the gathered community pass its store of wisdom to her.<sup>69</sup> In rituals, women can remember a rich spiritual heritage of spiritual foremothers. Women can create new symbols and images that affirm and celebrate their bodily experiences.

Feminist spiritual directors emphasize communal spirituality. To nurture and empower their embodied spiritual growth, women need their own space and time. According to Elizabeth D. Gray, in the safety of a sacred circle of companionship and sharing, women can gather their energy and spirit to try new ideas and ways of behaving. Women can dare to name their suffering, and in the process, can begin healing and

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<sup>69</sup> Myriel Crowley Eykamp, "Born and Born Again: Childbirth Rituals from a Mother's Perspective," in Sacred Dimensions of Women's Experience, 59.

moving toward their visions.<sup>70</sup> Women often express desire to participate in communities in which they can express their embodied experience spiritually and theologically and affirm their capacities for leadership in transforming disembodied spiritual traditions of Christianity.

Feminist spiritual directors have begun to cultivate women's embodied spiritual growth. For them, women's bodily experiences are central to women's spiritual journeys. Women need to become critically aware of their bodily experiences as affected by patriarchal beliefs, and to discern their authentic experiences. Feminist spiritual directors, therefore, usually reject body-denying spiritual disciplines, and suggest spiritual disciplines to empower and nurture women's bodily experiences and to discern the spiritual meanings of these experiences.

### Conclusion

Feminist religious educators, pastoral counselors and caregivers, and spiritual directors emphasize the importance of women's bodies and bodily experiences in relation to women's faith and spiritual growth. They provide important insights for empowering and nurturing women's embodied spiritual growth, especially in the midst of life transitions. They also give special attention to the tragic experiences that challenge women's embodied spiritual growth, and they discuss spiritual care for women in spiritual crisis. These theorists discuss diverse experiences of women's embodied lives.

The understanding of women's embodied spiritual growth can be further enhanced by listening to women's real life stories about their embodied spiritual journeys. This will

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<sup>70</sup> Gray, 21.

be the subject of the next chapter. Based on the theories presented thus far, religious educators need to listen to women's voices as they describe their embodied spiritual journeys. These can suggest alternative and holistic ways for understanding women's embodied spiritual growth.



## CHAPTER 5

### Women's Embodied Spiritual Growth: Personal Narratives

Women can learn the spiritual dimension of their embodied experiences and lives through sharing their own stories with other women. Personal narratives, shared, listened to, and honored will help women discover their authentic voices and discover as well the spiritual truths of their embodied experiences. Religious educators will find that careful listening to the narratives of women's embodied lives will enhance their own understanding of spiritual growth as a holistic experience. In this chapter, I will discuss the narrative theory and methodological design for using narrative research as an authentic tool to explore women's embodied spiritual growth. Using the narrative interview, I will describe and analyze the stories of twenty women who share with me their embodied spiritual journeys.

#### Narrative Theory and Methodological Design

In the past several years, interest in "narrative" as a powerful means for understanding human experience has increased significantly. A number of theorists, including psychologists, historians, anthropologists, and ethnographers, have advocated the narrative method because, in story-telling, people reveal the meanings of their lives. Researchers have begun to realize that people live in and through stories, and people give meaning to their life experiences by representing a narrative.

Donald Polkinghorne concisely shows that narrative enables us to understand the meaning of human experience:

Narrative is a scheme by means of which human beings give meaning to their experience of temporality and personal actions. Narrative meaning functions to give form to the understanding of a purpose to life and to join everyday actions and

events into episodic units. It provides a framework for understanding the past events in one's life and for planning future actions. It is the primary scheme by means of which human existence is rendered meaningful. Thus, the study of human beings by the human science needs to focus on the realm of meaning in general, and on narrative meaning in particular.<sup>1</sup>

There are particular reasons to use the narrative method to understand women's embodied spiritual growth. First, by telling a story, women can break their silence and find their voices. Women and minority people have kept silent for too long in theology, psychology, and education. Faith development has been largely defined by male theorists who have not fully understood women's bodily experiences. Because women have kept silent for a long time, men have often told women's stories. Thus, women's stories have often been distorted or have simply disappeared. Carol P. Christ argues that without stories women cannot understand themselves and are alienated from the deeper experiences of self and world. Christ says, "If women's stories are not told, the depth of women's souls will not be known."<sup>2</sup> The narrative method invites women to tell their stories with their own voices in order to understand themselves, others, and the world. The narrative method is a qualitative method. Advocates of qualitative research methods have argued that individual women's understandings, emotions, and actions in the world must be explored in women's own terms.<sup>3</sup> While quantitative methods have often concealed women's real experience, qualitative methods can actually permit women to express their experience fully and in their own terms.

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<sup>1</sup> Polkinghorne, Narrative Knowing and the Human Sciences, 11.

<sup>2</sup> Christ, Diving Deep and Surfacing, 1.

<sup>3</sup> Toby E. Jayarantne and Abigail J. Stewart, "Quantitative and Qualitative Methods in the Social Sciences," in Beyond Methodology, eds. Mary Margaret Fonow and Judith A. Cook (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 85.

Second, by telling a story, women can discover and create meaning in their lives. According to Andrew M. Greeley, storytelling is “humankind's primary meaning-bestowing activity.”<sup>4</sup> Greeley emphasizes that storytelling illuminates and renews not only the listener but the teller as well because people tell stories to explain themselves and their lives, first to themselves, and then to others.<sup>5</sup> By telling and listening to a story, people can search for, or clarify, the meaning of their lives. James P. Carse says, “When we come to know the stories of ourselves, we come to know the meaning of our lives as well; stories shape the way we see ourselves.”<sup>6</sup> By telling and sharing their life stories, women can also transform the meaning of their lives.

Third, by telling a story, women can overcome the division between body and mind, knowledge and emotion. According to Greeley, story appeals to and discloses “the total human person, soul and body, intelligence and sense, reason and intuition, reasoning and instinct.”<sup>7</sup> Woman’s authentic self cannot be divided into body and mind in story-telling. By telling a story, a woman can have an opportunity to consider what she has thought, felt, and done in her experience. Stephen Crites says, “Neither disembodied minds nor mindless bodies can appear in stories.”<sup>8</sup> Women’s experiences as whole beings are revealed in their stories.

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<sup>4</sup> Andrew Greeley, Religion as Poetry (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Pub., 1995), 38.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 37-38.

<sup>6</sup> James P. Carse, “Exploring Your Personal Myth,” in Sacred Stories, eds. Charles Simpkinson and Anne Simpkinson (New York: Harper San Francisco, 1993), 224.

<sup>7</sup> Greeley, 40.

<sup>8</sup> Stephen Crites, “The Narrative Quality of Experience,” in Why Narrative?, eds. Stanley Hauerwas and L. Gregory Jones (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Pub., 1989), 85.

Fourth, by telling a story, women can find the continuity among past, present, and future. According to Bertram J. Cohler, personal narratives are the most internally consistent interpretation of presently understood past, experienced present, and anticipated future.<sup>9</sup> By telling a story, women uncover meanings in their past experiences, express their present situation, and gain hope for the future. Crites says, “Our sense of personal identity depends upon the continuity of experience through time, a continuity bridging even the cleft between remembered past and projected future.”<sup>10</sup>

Fifth, women’s narrative can reveal the rules and structure of male domination. The Personal Narratives Group, which researches women’s life stories, argues that personal narratives of nondominant social groups are often particularly effective sources of counterhegemonic insight because they expose the viewpoint embedded in dominant ideology as particularist rather than universal, and because they reveal the reality of a life that defies or contradicts.<sup>11</sup> Women may experience patriarchal culture and system differently by different classes, ages, cultures, and sexual preferences. Women’s stories can reveal the interlocking nature of race, gender, and class oppression within the concrete realities of their daily lives. Women’s stories may reveal that the present faith development theories do not fully and fairly understand women’s embodied spiritual growth. Their stories also can reveal how patriarchal teachings suppress and hinder women’s holistic and embodied spiritual growth.

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<sup>9</sup> Bertram J. Cohler, “Personal Narrative and Life Course,” in Life-Span Development and Behavior, eds. Paul B. Baltes and Orville G. Brim, vol. 4 (New York: Academic Press, 1982), 207.

<sup>10</sup> Crites, 78.

<sup>11</sup> Personal Narrative Group, ed. Interpreting Women’s Lives (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), 7.

Finally, this method can free interviewees' authentic voices from the researcher's intention. In much of the mainstream research tradition, the interviewee-interviewer relationship is marked by a striking asymmetry of power. The hierarchal structure of the interviewee-interviewer relationship often disrupts individuals' attempts to make coherent sense of what is happening to them and around them.<sup>12</sup> In the narrative method, the interviewee is a story-teller, and the interviewer is a listener. Elliot G. Mishler describes this redefined relationship between interviewee and interviewer as informant and reporter, as research collaborators, and as learner/actor and advocate.<sup>13</sup> In personal narratives, the individual's life-truths may not be the same as facts found through empirical research. They may be "facts" colored by the person's feelings or incomplete memories of events; however, the interviewee reveals truths of his or her experiences. The truths of personal narratives are "the truths revealed from real positions in the world, through lived experience in social relationships, in the context of passionate beliefs and partisan stands."<sup>14</sup> Narrative researchers must respect the potential value of the interviewees' ideas and be sensitive to their perspectives and experiences.

### The Purpose of Research

The purpose of this research is to understand more fully and accurately women's embodied spiritual growth through their story-telling, and then to search for an educational method to nurture and empower women's embodied spiritual journeys. The research is grounded in a feminist perspective and, as in other feminist research, the aim

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<sup>12</sup> Mishler, Research Interviewing, 120.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 123.

<sup>14</sup> Personal Narrative Group, 261-63.

is not just the study, but the realization of women's full humanization and liberation.

According to feminist researchers, three principles are identified. Research should contribute to women's liberation through producing knowledge that can be used by women themselves; should use methods of gaining knowledge that are not oppressive; and should continually develop a feminist critical perspective that questions dominant intellectual traditions and reflects on its own development.<sup>15</sup>

By using narrative method, this research will contribute to women's full humanization and spiritual maturation through producing knowledge about women's embodied spiritual growth. Knowledge arises from narrative method that stresses mutual interaction between interviewee and interviewer and empowers the interviewee to express her authentic voice. This research also continually develops a feminist critical perspective that questions biases and distortions of women's embodied spiritual growth in male faith development theories. The intent is to reflect on women's spiritual growth in relation to their bodily experiences. In feminist research, feminist perspective needs to be reflected in the statement of purpose, topic selection, theoretical orientation, choice of method, view of human nature, and definitions of the researcher's roles.<sup>16</sup> In the process of developing and practicing research, I will carefully reflect feminist perspective.

Using a narrative method, this research will reveal shared themes among a group of particular women. These interviewees' stories may or may not be transferable to a larger population because each woman's story is unique. However, no woman's story is just

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<sup>15</sup> Joan Acker, Kate Barry, and Johanna Esseveld, "Objectivity and Truth: Problems in Doing Feminist Research" in *Beyond Methodology*, 133.

<sup>16</sup> Fonow and Cook, 5.

her own. All of these women's embodied experiences are centrally organized by gender in this patriarchal society. Therefore, each woman's story may reflect something of many other women's stories.

### The Story-tellers in Research

During a period of two years, twenty women between the ages of twenty and sixty were interviewed. Interviewees were selected from diverse races, ages, sexuality, geography, and denominations. Ten laywomen were selected by contacting pastors and lay leaders in different denominations, and ten seminarians were selected by contacting members of women's groups in seminaries. Interviewees were selected in the areas of Pennsylvania, New York, and California. Most of them do not have a personal relationship with interviewer.

Residence. Ten women interviewed live in California. Six of them live in Pennsylvania. Four of the women interviewed live in New York

Religion. Most of the women interviewed are Christian; the exceptions are one Jewish woman, one Jehovah's Witness, and one Unitarian. The Christian denominations are diverse, including United Methodist, Presbyterian, Southern Baptist, Roman Catholic, United Church of Christ, and Universal Fellowship Metropolitan Community of Church. Two women participate in non-denominational or interfaith Christian churches.

Education. Two women have a high school education. Four women are college educated. Three hold graduate degrees. One woman has a medical school education. Ten women are seminarians, seven in masters programs, and three in Ph.D programs.

Class. Five of the women interviewed may be considered as coming from working-class backgrounds. Fourteen women may be considered middle class. One woman

identifies herself as coming from the upper-middle class.

Ethnic background. Eight of the women are European-American; three are Afro-American; one woman has both Native-American and Afro-American heritage; and one has an Afro-American father and a European-American mother. Three of the women interviewed are Asian-- Korea, Taiwan, and Pakistan. Three women are Hispanic; one woman is Jewish.

Sexual orientation. Sixteen women identify themselves as heterosexual. Three of the women identify themselves as lesbian. One woman is self-identified as bisexual.

Family information. Nine women interviewed are married. Two of them are divorced and remarried. One of them is a widow. Eight heterosexual women have children. Three lesbian women have family with their partners, and have no children. Seven women are single.

To describe each interviewee in detail, I give some personal information about each interviewee. To preserve their anonymity, I name them A through T, instead of using their real names. Women from A to J are laywomen, and women from K to T are seminarians. When I describe or analyze their stories, I will use these signs:

A: middle 20s, Asian, Presbyterian, single, college education.

B: late 20s, Caucasian, Southern Baptist, and now Presbyterian, single, Ph.D student.

C: middle 30s, African-American, married, graduate degree.

D: late 30s, Asian, single, graduate degree.

E: middle 30s, Hispanic, Presbyterian, married, has one child, college education.

F: late 30s, German, United Church of Christ, married, has two children, college



education.

G: early 40s, Spanish, Jehovah's Witness, single, medical school education.

H: early 40s, Native American/Afro-American, a member of non-denominational church, married, has one child, high school education.

I: middle 40s, Jewish, married, has two children, college education.

J: early 60s, Afro-American, Baptist, married, four children, high school education.

K: early 20s, Afro-American, Unitarian, a seminarian.

L: middle 20s, Caucasian, a member of United Church of Christ, a lesbian, a seminarian.

M: middle 20s, Puerto Rican, Methodist, single, a seminarian.

N: early 30s, German/Irish, Universal Fellowship Metropolitan Community Church, a lesbian, a seminarian.

O: middle 40s, Indian, Former Methodist, but now United Church of Pakistan, married, has three children, a seminarian.

P: late 30s, Greek, Interfaith, a lesbian, a seminarian.

Q: middle 40s, Afro-American, United Methodist, married, has two children, a seminarian.

R: middle 40s, Caucasian, Roman Catholic, married, a seminarian.

S: late 30s, Caucasian, Disciples of Christ Church, single, a seminarian.

T: late 60s, Anglo-American with some Native American, Methodist, widow, a seminarian.

### The Method of Interview

This research uses a biographical-narrative interview, asking interviewees to give a full extempore narration of events and experiences from their lives.<sup>17</sup> I initiated the

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<sup>17</sup> Rosenthal, "Reconstruction of Life Stories," 60.

interview by asking an opening question, "Could you tell me the story about your spiritual journey related to your bodily experiences?" At the beginning of the interview, I indicated that I would not interrupt while an interviewee was telling the story. I asked them for permission to tape record for an accurate description of their story-telling. Even though I did not make a consent form of confidentiality, I promised that I would not use their names in relation to the information contained in the narrative.

The main narration following the initial question generally lasted between 40 to 60 minutes. The interviewees talked in great detail about their spiritual journeys in relation to their bodily experiences, usually without any additional questions by the interviewer. After the story-telling of an interviewee, I initiated more focused narrative questions, related to topics of embodiment and spiritual growth. The focused questions are:

- (1) When you consider your body, what are your major life experiences related to your body?
- (2) In what particular ways do these bodily experiences influence your faith or spirituality?
- (3) What is (are) the most nurturing experience(s) on your spiritual journey?
- (4) What is (are) the most challenging experience(s) on your spiritual journey?

These questions were modified depending upon the story told by the interviewee. The interviewee and I spent a few minutes in clarifying the questions.

In narrative research method, the power relationship between interviewer and interviewee is different from the typical survey interview in which interviewer controls the interview through specific questions. The person who tells the story and finds the meaning of her life is the interviewee. Elliot G. Misher suggests that a central task of the interviewer is to find ways to empower respondents so that they have more control of the

process through which their words are given meaning.<sup>18</sup> The role of the interviewer is to invite the interviewee to tell her story with her own voice. The interviewer must not interrupt the storytelling of the interviewee. Many theorists of narrative method suggest that the interviewee should be allowed to control the introduction and flow of topics, and should simply be encouraged to extend their responses.<sup>19</sup> The storytelling of the interviewee may be suppressed by an interviewer's interruption or the demands of time. At the beginning of each interview, I indicated that I was a listener of her story-telling and the interviewee could decide what to share from her story and the length of time spent.

Each interview is a product of the mutual interaction between interviewer and in interviewee. Narrative method is a very effective way to create a sense of intimacy between the interviewer and the interviewee. The interviewer can express her concern and encourage the interviewee to tell her story "by means of nonverbal and paralinguistic expressions of interest and attention, such as 'mhm'"<sup>20</sup> without interrupting the story-telling. This was the approach in these twenty interviews. Because the stories of the women were both profound and meaningful, I was deeply involved with them, especially the stories of four women who were sexually abused. These stories were very hard for me to hear because of the women's deep pain and endless struggling to overcome their tragic experiences. Some of the interviewees cried during the interviews.

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<sup>18</sup> Mishler, 118.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 69.

<sup>20</sup> Rosenthal, 60.

An interviewer has to decide how much she or he is emotionally involved in the story-telling of interviewees. Many feminist scholars discuss the emotional intimacy between researcher and researched. According to Mary M. Fonow and Judith A. Cook, one of the major features of feminist epistemology is its refusal to ignore the emotional dimension of the conduct of inquiry.<sup>21</sup> Feminist researchers often attend specifically to the role of the affect in the production of knowledge. Feminist researchers insist that emotions serve as a source of insight or as a signal of rupture in social reality. Fonow and Cook say, "The ethic of caring, used to validate knowledge claims, includes an emphasis on individual uniqueness, the acceptance of the appropriateness of emotions in dialogue, and the cultivation of the capacity for empathy."<sup>22</sup> In each interview, I tried to create an open and empathetic atmosphere in the interaction process.

#### The Method of Description and Analysis

After the interview, the recorded interviews were fully transcribed. In narrative research, an accurate description of narrative accounts is very important. An accurate description is required to make a reliable and valid analysis and interpretation. The theorists of the narrative method suggest tape recording and careful transcription of the interview for accurate description.<sup>23</sup> Cathlerine K. Riessman advises an effective method to transcribe interview text. She suggests beginning with a rough transcription, a first draft of the entire interview that gets the words and other striking features of the conversation on paper; then, one goes back to retranscribe selected portions for detailed

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<sup>21</sup> Fonow and Cook, 9.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 9-10.

<sup>23</sup> Mishler, 36.

analysis. For her, the task of identifying narrative segments and their representation cannot be delegated. By transcribing this way, interpretive categories emerge, ambiguities in language are heard on the tape, and the oral record provides clues about meaning.<sup>24</sup>

Based on Riessman's method of transcription, I began with a rough transcription of the entire interview, took the words and other common themes, and went back to retranscribe them for detailed analysis. In preparing a complete transcription, the interview texts were categorized by common themes or stages of the interviewees' lives which they described or narrated. Interviewees talked about their bodily experiences, such as menstruation, body image, sexuality, sexual abuse, pregnancy, childbirth, marriage, divorce, and menopause, their relationships with family, their images of God, and their experiences in their churches. It is not easy to categorize women's stories into categories set up by the interviewer because of the diversity of women's stories. Informal interviews controlled by the interviewees are not easy to analyze and interpret because it is difficult to achieve a sense of the diverse stories as tied together.<sup>25</sup> Donald E. Polkinghorne mentions the difficulty of categorizing narratives into certain forms. He differentiates the categorization and typology of narratives from those of natural and biological sciences. There is no single typology or system of categories to describe various plots. He thinks that the elements of narratives are related primarily according to

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<sup>24</sup> Riessman, Narrative Analysis, 56-58.

<sup>25</sup> Mishler, 87-88.

their similarities and dissimilarities rather than according to their inclusion in, or exclusion from, a category.<sup>26</sup>

After the narratives were categorized according to various themes, they were transcribed word-for-word as spoken in common themes. I tried to offer accurate transcriptions to represent the women's own voices of their experiences, memories, and expectations. Women's stories were categorized into specific themes, such as: women's bodily experiences in their spiritual journey, relationships with family and others, the images of God and relationships with God, experiences in church, and understandings of spiritual journey and spiritual growth. These were large themes that emerged naturally in the interviews. I did not exclude or include any part of interviewees' stories for my own purposes and categorization. I described word for word, as spoken, with no respect for the rules of written language.

Narratives told by women are texts for analysis. The theme or point of their story is not usually presented directly by the interview text. The researcher needs to interpret and analyze the texts. Thematic field analysis was used to analyze narrated life stories. This analysis involves reconstructing the interviewees' systems of knowledge, their interpretations of their lives, and their classification of experiences; these were grouped into thematic fields.<sup>27</sup> Thematic analysis focuses on the organization of accounts in terms of "coherence." Referential meaning expressed through "themes" and their relations to each other is fundamental to analysis and interpretation.<sup>28</sup> According to Gabriele

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<sup>26</sup> Polkinghorne, 167.

<sup>27</sup> Rosenthal, 61.

<sup>28</sup> Mishler, 87.

Rosenthal, the stories that are selected by the interviewee to present her life story cannot be regarded as a series of isolated experiences, laid down in chronological order; individual experiences are always embedded in a coherent, meaningful context, a biographical construct.<sup>29</sup>

In conducting actual interviews, I followed the narrative interview method. When I asked an initial question, “Could you tell me the story about your spiritual journey related to your bodily experiences?” interviewees generally told their stories in between 40-60 minutes. Most of them told their spiritual journeys chronologically. They usually began to tell the stories by describing their family backgrounds and their positions within the families. After describing their family and religious backgrounds, they usually told stories about important spiritual experiences they had. They talked about their relationships with God and their understandings of God and the Holy Spirit. Most of the women had a difficult time telling their bodily experiences and connecting their bodily experiences with their spiritual journeys. When the main narration was finished, I asked for more detail about their stories, focusing particularly on topics of embodiment and spiritual growth. With this background on theory and method, we turn now to the major analytic themes: women’s bodily experiences and spiritual growth; relationships with family and others; images and relationships with God; experiences in church and Christianity; and understandings of spiritual journey and growth.

#### Women's Bodily Experiences and Spiritual Growth

When I asked about their spiritual journey related to bodily experiences, the first responses of women were very similar. Most of women described the difficulties in

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<sup>29</sup> Rosenthal, 62.

relating their bodily experiences and faith journeys. They had not had previous opportunities to speak openly their bodily experiences and sexuality with anyone. Some of their initial responses illuminate the challenge:

A: Are you sure it's okay to talk about my body and bodily experiences?

C: The question of body in spirituality is a new thing.

M: Well, I think this is a very important experience and I thank you for inviting me to take part in this, but I never really thought about that.

T: Physical things, I'm not really sure where you want to go with that, but it's really interesting. I never heard a whole lot of talk about women's bodies. That was bad. I didn't have any sense about my body.

For these interviewees, women's bodily experiences had been regarded as taboo subjects or embarrassing topics for discussion, or they had never thought about their bodily experiences in relation to spirituality.

Many interviewees described the difficulty of talking about their spiritual journey in relation to bodily experiences because they were not accustomed to associating spirituality and bodily experiences.

J: I mean, how would you answer that related to religion? To me that doesn't relate to religion or faith.

O: For us, the body is something which is not sacred. Anything which is not sacred cannot give you a spiritual experience. Up till now, I have never thought about this aspect.

These interviewees could not talk about their bodily experience in relation to spiritual growth, suggesting little awareness of embodied spirituality.

Women who had experienced sexual abuse had a particularly difficult time talking about their bodily experiences, and finding connections between body and spirituality or body and mind. Some of these said:



C: The curse of the molestation, I left my body. In fact, [since then] I have been out of touch with my body.

D: [Relating] body and spirituality is new for me because of my experience of molestation. I left my body. I had to be out of touch with my body.

L: You know, this is such a weird question. . . My bodily experience has not been connected to spirituality. There is such a huge split between my mind and my body.

Interviewees who experienced sexual abuse want to deny their bodily experiences, especially the experience of sexual molestation, and thus developed dualistic thinking of body and mind.

After the interviewees and I had initially clarified the meaning of women's bodily experiences, the women were silent for a few minutes and then began to tell their stories about menstruation, pregnancy, childbirth, body image, sexuality, marriage, divorce, and sexual abuse. Most of the women were not sure how their bodily experiences influenced their spiritualities, but during the interviews they tried to find spiritual meaning in those bodily experiences.

When I asked the women about their bodily experiences, some of them were confused about the meaning. Some of them were a little embarrassed to share about those experiences. However, after clarifying the question and keeping silence for few minutes, all of the women began to talk openly. The following themes emerged.

### Menstruation

Most of women had never talked about menstruation in public, even with friends or mother. Without being able to talk about menstruation, women developed some fear about it. Some women talked about religious idea of menstruation. Even though they do

not agree with religious thinking that menstruation is God's punishment of women, they have no positive attitudes toward it.

Some interviewees said that menstruation is a private experience that does not need to be discussed in public. Some women complained that their mothers did not give special care or provide any explanation before their first experiences of menstruation and failed to help them develop a positive attitude toward it.

A: People seldom talk about menstruation. You should not talk about that topic in public. My personal point of view is that it's dirty and we should not talk about that. . . . Most women think that [menstrual] pain is natural. Sometimes, they do complain why we have to go through pain like that?

G: My mother never fully explained to me what would happen when I got my period. . . that I would have stomach cramps or feel emotional or want to cry. . . . She didn't take the time to explain what was happening or make me feel proud that "I am a woman now."

O: In my country, we don't talk about these things. Menstruation is not discussed in public. Nobody talked to me, even in a school. . . . My mother was educated, but even she never talked about these things.

For many interviewees, the experience of menstruation is a taboo that is not shared with others. Many women experience the first menstruation without any emotional preparation or knowledge.

Interviewees' bodily experiences in menstruation are all different. Those who had relatively little pain or no premenstrual syndrome generally accepted menstruation as natural.

F: I was always thankful to God and wondered why was I lucky to have it so mild compared to my girlfriend who had to be in bed for three days.

J: Menstruation is not a clean thing. The only time I felt embarrassed was when I got it for the first time. But as I got older and had children, I didn't feel [embarrassed] anymore.

**Q:** Menstruation, I just say “Yuck,” I think it’s a message to us about our physical being and the importance of being in tune with it and keeping it healthy so that we can be whole.

**T:** Menstruation was unpleasant because I flowed very heavily. Some girls used to call it the “curse” but for me it wasn’t a big deal.

For these women menstruation is a natural cycle of woman’s body; they do not think of it in negative ways.

Some interviewees suffered serious menstrual pains and problems.

**E:** From the first time, I had a very bad experience with cramps. A couple of times I had to go to the hospital. I wished I was a guy because I hated getting my period.

**I:** I started to menstruate at the age of ten and a half. I had understood that it was a part of womanhood, so I looked forward to it. However, I didn’t expect it to be so messy and painful.

**K:** In high school, I used various forms of birth control that really disrupted my menstrual cycle. I would bleed for thirty days and not bleed for two days and then bleed for thirty days. I can’t even remember when I had a normal menstrual cycle. There’s always blood and it’s very tiring.

These women thought about the menstrual experience differently, depending on the degree of physical pain.

Three interviewees had positive thoughts about menstruation, finding spiritual meaning in it. One of them experienced powerful healing by sharing the menstrual experience with her friends. The other women exercised their spiritual power in menstruation by using their own imaginations.

**R:** About ten days before my period begins, I feel a marked shift in my emotions. On a chart of female hormones I noticed they increase just about ten days before your period starts and then drop off. . . . I could think of the days when I was feeling moody and low as kind of passion days and the days I’m feeling good as resurrection days. So I can sort of identify with Jesus during these times. That was helpful.

**S:** In our weekly group, we spent [a lot of time] talking about menstruation and pregnancy. It was just so powerful and so healing for me. . . . We talked about what it

was like when we started to menstruate, what happened, how our family reacted, what were we told. . . . And then reflected on how we saw our bodies theologically, as metaphors. That was a healing experience.

P: I grew up surrounded by the ocean. So, I have always felt very connected to my body and the pulse of the earth with the tides and the full moon. [Women] recognize that our skin [color] doesn't matter, our culture doesn't matter. . . . Menstruation is something we have in common. That's an incredible bond. It [is] something spiritual because it's something that all women go through and [we are] very much connected to the moon and the ocean.

Spiritual imagination of menstruation as Jesus's Passion and Resurrection helped one interviewee accept menstruation as a time for spiritual reflection. By sharing the experiences of menstruation with her friends, another experienced healing and empowerment. One thought of women's bonding through menstrual experience as women's unique and common experience.

For all interviewees, menstruation was the first experience of recognizing their female bodies. The onset of menstruation was a momentous event for the women physically, emotionally, and spiritually. In spite of the importance, menstrual experience was seldom discussed in public or private relationships. They rarely had an opportunity to share their feelings, such as anxiety, shame, excitement, or physical pain with family or friends. Even their own mothers did not give enough information about menstruation, nor did they help them to be proud of their new bodily experience as women's creative power. Some women blamed their mothers for not guiding them properly into a new experience (G, O). Most of the interviewees did not have any ritual or communal gathering to celebrate or nourish menstrual experience as a girl became a woman.

Even though most of the interviewees did not accept the religious belief that menstruation was God's punishment for Eve's disobedience, they could not be

completely free from a negative attitude. That religious belief had been internalized by a conservative family or church community.

Distinctive understandings of menstruation were based on each interviewee's personal physical experience. For some interviewees, menstruation was simple and only mildly uncomfortable, but some women's situation was compounded by considerable pain. Interviewees who had relatively less menstrual pain and premenstrual syndrome accepted menstruation as a natural process (F, J, Q, T). One of them thanked God for choosing her to have mild pain. Women who had serious pain had more negative feelings about menstruation (E, I, K).

Only three interviewees presented spiritual meaning in menstruation (P, R, S). All three of them were seminarians who were influenced by feminist theology or women's groups. They experienced powerful healing and nurturing by sharing their menstrual experiences with their friends or other women. One interviewee especially remembered Jesus's suffering and identified her suffering during her menstrual period with Jesus's suffering (R). Another interviewee believed that women shared a common bond because of menstrual experience, that women experienced connectedness with each other and the earth through the menstrual experience (P).

Menstruation is an important event that marks women's initiation into adult female embodiment and a sense of divine creativity. Despite the importance of menstruation in women's self-understanding and spiritual growth, women rarely have opportunities to share their feelings and physical experiences with others and to celebrate the onset of their creative power. In the Christian community and family, menstruation is seldom

mentioned or celebrated. Feminist theology or women's groups provide women with an opportunity to realize spiritual meanings of menstruation.

### Body Images

Most interviewees realized how social and religious ideas regarding women's bodies influenced their own body images and self-esteem. When the interviewees talked about the human body, they thought about it in positive ways like being the vessel of God or the temple of God. However, when interviewees talked about their female bodies, they were not sure that women's bodies were sacred. One interviewee even abuses her body to express her anger, even though she speaks of the human body as a beautiful vessel of God.

Some talked about the relation of social attitudes and their own attitudes toward their bodies. One, for example, felt guilty about her good appearance compared to her sister.

**M:** When I grew up, my sister was always heavier than I. So, I grew up feeling guilty about being thinner and prettier. And I think that affects me still. I don't like to be told that I'm pretty. I feel guilty about it, especially if they are not saying the same thing to my sister. . . . I never felt good or proud about looking pretty.

Only one white woman tells how she is proud of her good complexion, thinness, and naturally curly hair.

**F:** When I was a teenager, I was very tall and slender, had naturally curly hair; my complexion was wonderful. . . . Sometimes I think "Wow." God picks and chooses who has a bad complexion, who has a good complexion. I take care of myself as best as I can.

Most women of color describe the difficulty of having a positive body image in this white supremacist society. In their childhood or their teens, they experienced emotional pain and alienation

**E:** When I moved to Pennsylvania, we lived in an all white neighborhood and our school was all white. The people had never seen black people before. They would call me "nigger." We even had a play one time, a Christmas play and this little kid

said to me, “They don’t have dark angels in heaven.” I went to my mom crying, “Mom, I can’t be an angel because they don’t have black angels in heaven. . .” Sometimes we would have little plays and the guy had to pick the girl and even though I wasn’t unattractive, I would never get picked.

G: I grew up in a Jewish neighborhood. I was the only Spanish girl. I wanted to be Jewish so badly. . . . I felt very negative about my body. And I’ve had a weight problem all my life. In American culture, thin is beautiful. So, I was always on a diet, always depriving myself, always feeling deprived. Neither my spirituality nor God was ever related to that. [They were] almost two separate things. I think it’s wrong to do that. The two have to be connected.

K: My parents are very upper-middle class, so the environment that I was living in was mostly white. So, as a person of color, I didn’t have other persons of color around me. . . . And I think that really shaped my own understanding of myself as a person of color and my body especially. . . . I had an eating disorder which started when I was 12 years old in junior high. The disorders that occurred in my body reflected the problems I was experiencing in my social environment

These three women of color grew up in white neighborhoods and experienced alienation and racism in their childhood. They wanted to deny their skin color and racial identity and developed negative body images. Because of the idea that a beautiful body is tall, thin, and white, these women experienced mental pressure or eating disorders. One of them disclosed that she was always on a diet and always felt deprived because thin is beautiful in American culture. She believed that her spirituality and her body image were two separate things.

Some interviewees expressed hope that people would come to appreciate the colors of body in a racist society and would learn the beauty of difference.

J: I don’t hate racists but sometimes I feel sorry for them. We are all God’s people.

Q: The differences in my body make me who and what I am [just as the differences] in your body make you who you are. We have to learn to accept them for the beauty that’s there. . . .

As adults, most interviewees said they had overcome the negative stereotypes of their skin color, but they continue to worry about our racist society and hope that people will overcome racism and learn to accept difference.

Some interviewees described negative understandings of woman's body in their religious and cultural context.

**M:** As a woman I feel I have to cover up my body in order to be a good minister. That I can't dress so my breasts are showing or anything like that because I feel I'm giving men the wrong message. . . . Unless I make myself unattractive, I feel like I really can't be a good minister. It's okay for a male minister to look great but if I'm going to preach, I feel I have to make sure that there's nothing somebody might consider attractive or sexy.

**O:** The church in Pakistan is very much influenced by Islam. In Islam, Moslem women are supposed to cover their whole body, even their head cannot show. For us women to show a small part of our body is sin, it is abomination. . . . So, we try to cover our bodies. A girl can dance in a secular group but if she uses the same bodily images in the church or in a sacred song, we cannot consider it holy or proper. . . . I think the body is not bad. Body is a beautiful vessel of God and God speaks through this vessel.

These two women are pressured to cover their bodies in order to avoid giving wrong or sexual impressions to men in church. One seminarian always worries about giving wrong messages to men as a female minister. She is always careful to wear clothing that is not considered by men to be attractive or sexy. Another interviewee from Pakistan objects to patriarchal rules regarding women's bodies in her culture. She opposes the religious and cultural regulation of covering women's heads and of repressing women's bodily expression. She continually strives to transform her culture and to reclaim the sacredness of the female body in her church.

Some interviewees have dualistic ideas of body and mind or life style.

**C:** The curse of the molestation. . . I left my body. In fact, I have been so out of touch with my body. I sought refuge in my head many, many years ago and I am



just starting now to come down to my body.

**M:** This is a part of what I have been taught; my body is the temple of God and God lives through me. That's kind of been beat into my psyche. And I think that's kind of given me the motivation to keep my body fit. . . . I used my body as a source of punishment for not living up to what God wants me to be, or failing God. . . . I can remember growing up just getting angry and beating at myself. Not really caring about this body.

The first woman denied or “walled off” her body after the experience of sexual abuse.

The second expressed anger toward her body even though she described the human body as a temple of God.

Most interviewees' images of their bodies seem to have been influenced by social ideas of women's bodies and beauty. Each society has its own ideal image of the beauty of woman. Many interviewees had a hard time fulfilling these ideal images of women's body. They described the difficulties in having positive body images and accepting the sacredness of body in a patriarchal and white supremacist society. Because of the dominant society's preference for white women, women of color described particularly hard times overcoming negative body images and emotional pain (E, G, J, K, Q). In this patriarchal environment that socially defines the beauty of the female body as external and religiously characterizes the female body as a source of sexual temptation, many women have a hard time discerning their natural and inward beauty and celebrating the sacredness of their female bodies.

### Sexuality

Most of the women are uncomfortable to talk about their sexuality. They had not previously felt free to talk about their sexuality. They grew up in very conservative Christian families who emphasized a negative view of sexuality. They learned that sex

was a bad thing, and sexual thoughts were impure thoughts. Women had pressure to keep their chastity. Women described guilt and shame because of their sexual fantasies, premarital sexual relationships, and sexual abuse.

A: When I was a high school student, we had a chapter on sexual education, and the teacher just skipped the chapter. So everybody knows that chapter 14 is the one that everyone skips. So, we seldom talk about that.

B: I was raised in a Southern Baptist home. . . very strict, Christian fundamentalist home. You don't have sex until you get married, you don't curse, you don't drink. . . it was very schizophrenic. . . . It was very repressed. Sexuality was a bad thing so you couldn't have these feelings. So, it led to rebellion.

E: When I was little, my parents taught me there were certain things that you were not supposed to do. They didn't tell me that sex was wrong, that it was bad or whatever. It was just an issue that we never talked about.

I: In my religious upbringing [I learned] "don't follow your instincts. . ." If you're scared, that means you shouldn't be doing that thing until you're married or engaged.

R: At the age I began to have sexual fantasies, I immediately thought it was sinful. That's a terrible thing to do to a child. If we entertained impure thoughts, that was a mortal sin. It was so sad. It has taken me a long time to accept the fact that sex is good and there is nothing wrong with having sexual fantasies.

Most women interviewees grew up in homes where communication about sexuality was not open and not positive or affirming. In conservative Christian families and religious communities, they internalized passive or negative attitudes of sexuality.

One interviewee reported that her mother did not help her to grow up with healthy and positive thoughts about sex.

G: I'm very sexual person so I started masturbating at a very young age and she[mother] caught me. She came into the room, she grabbed me, she said to me, "If you ever do that again, I'm going to cut your hands off." I knew she thought it was wrong but I didn't understand why. . . . Because my parents didn't raise me to feel healthy about my body and what was happening with my own sexuality, I had a lot of negative feelings.

Mother's curse without explaining the reason for her anger negatively influenced the

interviewee's healthy and positive understanding of her body and sexuality.

Some women talk about the difficulties in regard to exercising their power to control their own bodies and sexuality in relationship with men, especially before marriage.

E: I always told my boyfriends that I wanted to save it for marriage. Deep down in my heart I kind of enjoyed it that the man respected you more. . . . I had two serious boyfriends and we broke up because I would never go all the way them and they would seek it elsewhere.

F: The most challenging experience with my faith journey had to have been meeting a male and being in such an awkward situation with sex. If the male person wants to have and needs to have [sex] at that time, then he will have to find another female companion. I could see that it wasn't for me, [and] they just wanted to have sex with somebody.

I: It's probably selfish, but I never used the womanly part of who I am. I taught myself that giving of yourself fully was the best gift that you can give to someone that you love and that's what I did save it for. It was a very serious commitment on my behalf.

R: I thought about it in terms of my own experience, how I was inclined to fall in love with people I admire. For example, I fell in love with my professor. . . . If somebody brings out in you an aspect of yourself that you didn't realize was there or if they embody something that you really admire, that brings you alive in a way that you weren't before. You can understand that it's happening but you don't have to go to bed with that person.

These interviewees understood that one of the challenging experiences in their faith journeys was the sexual relationship with men. They complained that men think of women as sexual objects. Sometimes, they felt men just wanted a sexual relationship with somebody. The women wanted a sexual relationship based on respect, love, and compassion.

One woman rejected the social idea of woman as a flower. She saw a flower as symbolizing woman as a sexual object of man.

S: I got in touch with the whole de-flowering idea which is archetypal that is such a masculine way of thinking about female sexuality. When a girl reaches 16, she

blooms and then you pluck her flower when you have sex with her. A woman's flower cannot be plucked. A woman is her own flower. What a woman becomes, over the years of her life, that is her flowering.

This interviewee not only challenged the de-flowering idea, but also insisted that a woman is her own flower, and should not be plucked by another.

Exploring sexuality is a very difficult process. Because of religious and cultural beliefs, some interviewees could not enjoy sexual pleasure. Two women talked about the process of exploring their own sexuality.

R: Catholicism is a very incarnational religion, we believe that God is present in body and soul. . . . But, at the same time, it is very puritanical about sex. I'm still a student of sex. My sexual relationship with my husband wasn't all that satisfying. . . . When we made love, he always insisted that I have an orgasm. Sometimes I don't feel like having orgasm, sometimes, I feel close to my husband and I want to be physical and I especially want to satisfy him but I don't have any particular strong sex drive. . . . Now, I am more free, I enjoy sex more. God is in freedom. I have a feeling that I can discover God more fully in the sex act than I have.

K: I thought that my connecting with another person was the way to find something greater within myself. . . . So, I broke down a sense of myself in a way because I was always putting myself out there without paying attention to who I was, going from one person to the next person, to the next person. Then I got to a point in my life that I wasn't getting anything from anyone else at all and that's when I stopped. My way of spiritual exploration was definitely through sex relating to other people.

These interviewees recognized a search for authentic sexuality in their lives.

The interviewee who is Jehovah's Witness leads a celibate life because of her religious belief.

G: I do believe that God's law is right and it does tell you that He does not permit sex outside of marriage. The marriage arrangement is the proper place for it and it's better for you emotionally. A lot of people have problems having sex with different partners and they're confused. I lead a celibate life because I'm not married. I don't have a problem with that.

Because her religious beliefs prohibited premarital sex, one woman had decided on a celibate life, even though she identified herself as a sexual person before.

Two young mothers, who take care of young children, talked about their asexual relationships with their husbands. Because of many responsibilities in mothering, these young mothers were tired physically and mentally, and they could not enjoy their sexual lives.

E: I guess I'm a sexually active individual. It's so different when you're married than when you are going out. You're just so active when you are young, and when you are married and have children, you are like "Oh Boy."

F: My husband is self-employed and. . . right now we are swamped with work and our sexual life is awful. It's not where I want it to be and it probably will not be for years. Being a mother and running a household, cleaning, chores, grocery shopping. . . all that a mother is expected [to do.] By the time 8,9 o'clock comes at night, we are pooped beyond pooped. That sounds awful but in this point, in the year of 1997, I have thought many times about I miss all that love and compassion.

These young mothers said that they are missing the sexual parts of their lives because of the responsibilities and exhaustion of mothering.

Lesbian women tell about searching for their authentic sexuality and coming to know themselves as lesbians.

L: I didn't know what a lesbian was, how loving another woman could be. I'm so sad that I didn't know I was lesbian. . . . I was so cut off from my sexual feelings [although] I was having lots of sex. I have been having sex since 16 years old, [but] I didn't have an orgasm till I was 22. I have been so disconnected from my body that I didn't know about something as elemental and natural as an orgasm.

N: I felt called to a different truth about my sexual orientation or predisposition, regarding being in a sexual relationship with women as opposed to men. And it was frightening. . . . But the message I kept receiving was that I had to have faith in God; to own all the truths about my body and all the truths of the various bodies that are in this world. . . .

These interviewees described the fear they experienced while searching for their authentic sexuality; they realized how much heterosexual society repressed women's sexuality.

The same women described the spiritual meanings of their sexuality and sexual relationships.

**L:** I think that sexuality is absolutely, positively essential in our relationship with God. There are times in the sexual [act] with my partner that I feel most close to God. When my body [is] very oriented toward her body [and hers] toward mine. Orgasm is such a huge letting go. What does it mean to help another person achieve that? I feel that is a very embodied theological [experience]. . . .

**N:** I did not make this decision based on physical desire alone. Somehow physical desire and being honest and clear with that is connected to my ability to have a truthful relationship with God in and through my body.

These two lesbian women think that they become closer to God and have more truthful relationships with God by finding and experiencing their authentic sexuality.

In summary, most of the interviewees had difficulty in exploring their authentic sexuality and enjoying sexual pleasure. They described that they have denied or repressed their own sexual feelings, adopted social norms about woman's sexuality, and were pressured to withdraw their interest in sexuality because of religious or parental teachings. They felt guilty for their sexual fantasies, premarital sex, and masturbation (B, E, G, I, R). Religious beliefs were largely oppressive, producing shame, guilt, and distress over their sexuality.

Many interviewees rarely experience mutual sexual pleasure with their partners. At the same time, they acknowledged their sexual experiences as important spiritual experiences to trust and love another person and God. They described their difficulties in controlling their bodies and sexuality in relationship with men, especially before marriage (E, F, I, R, S). Although men may refer to sex with a virgin as "deflowering" a woman, one of interviewees described woman's sexuality as her passion to love; a woman can release her own flowering with her love and passion (S).

Some women, who searched for their authentic sexuality and acted to meet their own sexual needs, found spiritual meaning in their sexuality. They identified a spiritual meaning in sexuality and sexual relationships (K, L, N, R). They found the process of exploring and enjoying their own sexuality to be a very difficult process. One interviewee believed she could reach God through her sexuality, through the act of intercourse. Another interviewee said that her spiritual exploration was through sex, in relating to other people.

Unlike heterosexual interviewees, lesbian women talked more openly and honestly about their sexuality and its spiritual nature (L, N). Three lesbian women described their sexual relationships as the most nurturing spiritual experiences they have. They talked about their struggle to explore their authentic sexuality in this heterosexual society that denies the existence of female homosexuality. The process was very painful, but finally they found a joy in life and the courage to “come out” as lesbians. They described the process of searching for their authentic sexualities as a spiritual process that has brought them closer to God, increased their trust people, and taught them the power of love and trust.

### Sexual Abuse

Four interviewees told of their experiences of sexual abuse in childhood and adulthood. Recalling and telling these memories was very painful for them. When they told their stories chronologically, they skipped the period when sexual abuse happened; however, they all went back to the period because they realized they could not tell their life stories without the stories of sexual abuse and rape. Because that experience has profoundly influenced their physical, emotional, and spiritual lives, they could not explain their

spiritualities if they excluded those tragic childhood experiences of sexual abuse and rape. As she began that story, each woman started to cry and asked me to stop the recording tape. After she calmed down emotionally, the woman continued her story and asked me to start the recording tape again. One of them asked me to copy the tape for her because this was the first time she had told her whole life story, including the sexual abuse, to another and to even herself. She wanted to hear her own voice.

C: I feel uncomfortable sharing. . . . About the time, I was between ten and twelve years, a significant person in my family started to molest me. . . . I remember the emotional scar. . . I couldn't go to church anymore. I contemplated suicide. . . . Nobody would understand because I had not been able to talk to anyone about it. So, I decided that would not be an appropriate thing to do. I prayed to God just to let me die in my sleep.

D: When I was young, I trusted adults, I needed their attention, but they broke my trust. I was sexually abused by a Sunday school teacher [when I was] eight years old. . . . I lost my trust of adults and God... and then, my boyfriend raped me when I was a university student. It was not sex, it was violence. I strongly resisted, and he beat my whole body and raped me. My mother cried and washed my cloths. [After that] I felt my body, feelings, and actions all worked separately.

L: In April of my first year of college, I met this man who raped me. That was pivotal to me. I don't understand what this God is about. . . . Through the next couple of months I was in a haze; when I came back to school after the summer break, I had a hard time and I did not do very well.

N: I was molested when I was between 4 and 5 years old and much of that I had forgotten. When I was 15 and began to have sexual feelings [those memories] started to come up more clearly. That's when I started to drink and do drugs. I try to keep myself from remembering as long as I could. When I was sober, I couldn't keep the memories away. Then at 19, I was assaulted and raped. So, I had feelings of or rage and sorrow and deep grief and confusion and of very intense aloneness and powerlessness. I prayed but it didn't help. . . . And I definitely thought about suicide.

These four women experienced sexual abuse by a person close to them--a family member, a Sunday school teacher, and a boyfriend. As children, they experienced a betrayal of trust. Their sexual abuse was a physically, emotionally, and spiritually painful and tragic



experience. They had a difficult time recovering from the trauma and its attendant anger, shame, and anxiety.

The experiences of sexual abuse or molestation challenged the women's relationships with God.

L: Basically it was like the God I know does not do things like this and I'm not going to believe in God anymore. I just basically said, "screw it." The most challenging time in my life was when I hated God. I didn't think that God existed at all, but I still hated his guts.

N: [Before I was raped,] I had already been assaulted by one of my step-fathers. So I had to make a distinction between what God would do to my body and what human beings, generally men, have done. I had trouble connecting God and men. I couldn't pray to God. The scariest part for me was thinking that there's nothing God can do.

These two interviewees confessed that the experiences of sexual abuse were the most challenging experiences in their spiritual journeys. They lost their trust in God and broke off their relationships with God.

As they healed, the interviewees recovered their relationship with God and found a new spirituality.

L: Since going to therapy and working on some of my grief issues and the sexual assault issues, I started feeling pulled back to God. I began to feel okay.

N: In AA, I was introduced to the interconnection of God and my body. God and my body were connected in this recovery that encompassed all this pain and damage. That's where I discovered a profound sense of deep relationship between spirituality and my body. It was a great spiritual awakening for me. It's a gift, through a mixed gift.

These two women participated in therapy or AA recovery programs to heal their physical, emotional, and spiritual pains. They also recovered their relationships with God.

Four interviewees talked about their experiences of sexual abuse. Sexual and domestic violence profoundly affected their self-understanding, as well as their

relationships with others and with God. They asked, “Where was God when I was abused?” They complained of the absence of God’s love and grace in the moments of sexual abuse and thereafter. They talked about their difficulties in subsequently having spiritual relationship with God, perceived as male. For them, the healing process is a never-ending process.

No women in this study who had experienced sexual violence found spiritual healing in their own Christian community. The interviewees did not have people or a community that helped them know their strengths or affirmed their struggles. Without being able to share their tragic experiences with others, even family or close friends, they thought about suicide. As an escape, one of them became alcohol and drug addicted for ten years, driven by her sense of aloneness and powerlessness. Neither the Christian community nor the church provided a place of healing and empowerment; they also experienced shame and guilt because of the general cultural pattern of blaming the female victim. Through therapy or recovery programs, some of them recovered their relationships with God and found a new spirituality. One interviewee experienced a spiritual awakening by uniting body and spirit through the healing of God (N).

### Marriage and Divorce

Eight women among interviewees were married (E, F, H, I, O, R, Q, T). Three women were divorced and remarried (F, H, R). Women rarely talked about the relationship with their husbands while telling their spiritual journeys. Only one interviewee talked about the spiritual meaning of her marital relationship.

**Q:** My husband is very supportive, I think the Spirit speaks to me, most of all, through him. Sometimes I think I spend more time listening to him because I think the Spirit is speaking through him. Spiritual journeys have to be developed and

nurtured like everything else in your life. It's not something that just comes. It's there and you have to grab hold of it and develop it.

Women who experienced marital problems or divorce talked about their marriage and divorce. They said that, through the experience of marriage problems and divorce, they searched their own spirituality and grew closer to God.

F: My husband and I were married for five years and then divorced. We just worked and made lots of money, we had money coming out of our ears. We had a new home, a new car. . . but the money over- powered us. My husband felt that was what a woman needed. . . . But that's not how I thought of marriage and it just didn't work. So we got a divorce. . . . I could not have gotten through my divorce without God. . . . God heard my frustrations, my upset, my pain, my struggles.

H: Our first two years of marriage were hell. We were both drinking, getting high on Drugs. . . . We separated for a while. . . . It was then that we realized we had to stop drugs, stop drinking. We came back into church, re-dedicated our lives to Christ. . . . Every time we had tried to fix a problem, it just got bigger and bigger. And He took it. Everyday we're learning something, we're learning a lot about each other. . . . Now, we have a very honest, trustful relationship.

R: Ten years after our marriage, my husband fell in love with another student. I was devastated. It was the worst year of my life. What helped me through this time was my faith. . . . I had felt close to God before, but suddenly, God was my Savior. . . my religious life become more and more important to me and I wanted to give more of myself to God because I was receiving so much from God. The divorce was a good thing. . . I hadn't realized how oppressed I was. He really exercised his power over me. Even a sexual relationship with him was so oppressive.

T: In 1981, I started to struggle with my marriage. I decided to go on a personal retreat. [The retreat gave me] an environment of safety, unconditional love, and [time] to be concerned with just myself. . . My feelings and emotions had been repressed. On that weekend, I was given permission to feel and to cry. . . It didn't resolve the problems in my marriage but it changed my life.

These interviewees described that they could not survive critical moments in their lives without the love and trust of God. One interviewee described her husband's misunderstanding that economic wealth was sufficient for a woman's happiness in marriage. Another interviewee had to cope with her husband's affair with another

woman. She had never experienced such pain. Only her faith helped her get through that horrible time.

One interviewee has delayed the decision of divorce because of her responsibility as a mother of young children. Her faith gives her strength in this situation.

F: This is not where I want to be in my life, but I have to remember that I have 5 and 6 year old sons. There's no way that I can get a job to support them. It wouldn't be good for our children at this point in time. My husband does not abuse me so, as a woman, and with my faith in God, I'm looking to give it another couple of years. Then my boys will be old enough to understand better and then I will have to make a decision.

This interviewee divorced and then reunited with her husband. She is still considering divorce, but continues to postpone it because of her responsibility to her young children. She believes that God has heard her frustration, pain, upset, and struggle and that God is helping her through it.

Another interviewee talked about her husband's discomfort with her male-like body gestures. Before marriage, she did not realize the problem; after marriage, her gestures became a cause of conflict with her husband.

C: I take after my father. Many things that I do are more male-like; I didn't realize how much until I got married. My husband felt I was competing with him because my body gestures were a lot like his body gestures. I'm still learning to be feminine. Now, I'm learning to be comfortable with whatever it is I feel. If I feel like walking in a feminine way, then I walk like that. If another day, I happen to feel more masculine, then I walk that way. I am learning to be comfortable with whatever comes out of me.

Due to stereotypical thinking of manhood and womanhood in this society, this interviewee had difficulty in expressing through her natural body gestures.

Another woman in an inter-racial marriage talked about social prejudice toward an inter-racial marriage.

E: My husband is German. When he first saw me he loved me. He didn't know what

in the world I was. He lived in a small town which was very prejudiced, but he didn't care. We used to visit his home town and [when we would go out to] get a drink, I saw people looking at him, looking at us. And he would never see that. That's something even now that he can't see but I see because I've been discriminated against. When I was pregnant, he had friends who were very prejudiced. They said, "Oh your baby is going to be black with big eyes."

This interviewee described that her Caucasian husband, who had never experienced racism, did not recognize other people's prejudicial attitudes and did not understand her emotional hurt. Love can overcome many differences, but a racist society makes love between different races difficult.

Lesbian women talked about how the relationship with their partners nurtures their own spirituality.

L: I think that the most nurturing theme in my spirituality has actually been my partner. . . . I had to learn what it meant to be faithful and to be able to hear God in the way He is speaking to me in any given moment. One of the reasons I was so attracted to her is that she did have this incredible relationship with God and [it was] something I wanted.

N: Where I experience nurturing is in my relationship with my female partner. I don't think it's simply physiological or sexual. . . . Often with lovemaking there's a tenderness, a profound care for one another. Not just "I love you" but it embraces that and extends beyond the immediate moment and holds within it a total sense of who I am. I understand and relate to God through that nurture.

For these two lesbian women, the most nurturing experience in their spiritual journeys is the nurturing and empowering relationship with their partner.

In summary, marital problems and divorce challenged the interviewees' spirituality, whether caused by a partner's betrayal, different understandings of marriage and women's roles, or socially stereotyped expectations (C, E, F, H, R, T). Through difficult experiences, interviewees had critical moments and struggled to be more faithful. They successfully went through their crises by building deeper relationships with God and their

spiritual practices. Lesbian women were more likely to talk about nurturing and caring relationships with their partners.

### **Pregnancy and Childbirth**

Seven women among the interviewees experienced pregnancy and childbirth (E, F, H, I, O, T, Q). Most of them said that pregnancy and childbirth were the most fully enlivening and nurturing experiences in their lives. Unlike other bodily experiences, such as menstruation, women thought that pregnancy and childbirth were powerful, both physically and spiritually.

E: When I was pregnant I loved it. I felt good. I think I started developing into a woman wise. I never knew that I was going to get this big in size.

F: My pregnancy was wonderful. . . . I thanked God for giving me body that was so healthy, so wonderful.

I: I thank God every minute for it[my pregnancy]. I always felt protected. I always felt that I was being looked after. . . . I felt like I was safe and everything would work out and God would protect the baby. . . . It's very strong, strong feeling.

T: Pregnancy was wonderful. Physically I felt wonderful when I was pregnant with my children. . . . There was a real sense of fullness, completeness that was noticeable for me. And I liked being me. I mean the pain of having children was not fun, but I have enjoyed being a mother.

Q: Childbirth was a very real part, a very vital part of my spiritual journey. [My] body and mind went through these changes, and I had to work at coming in tune with myself and who I was because I had this whole other life growing inside me. During pregnancy, I did a lot of reflecting and meditating about who God is in my life. It helped me get more in tune with my spirituality. I became a different person.

Pregnancy and childbirth were wonderful and spiritual experiences for most of the mothers. For these women, pregnancy was a spiritual journey for experiencing a new life inside them and for meditating on God's blessing and protection.

Interviewees, whether they experienced physical birth or not, expressed trust in

women's creative power and its spiritual meaning.

G: One thing I learned in medical school that amazes me is that at the time of conception, if it's going to be a female, in the genetic make-up in the chromosomes in that egg are 200,000 potential eggs for when that little girl gets to be a woman. She will have 200,000 eggs in her ovaries to release during her lifetime. That's a beautiful thing and we should be proud of that.

L: There is something very spiritual about a woman's ability to have a child, to have a being grow inside of her. I haven't had a child, but I imagine it must be an amazing spiritual experience. The ability for a woman to have a child, a woman to menstruate, is a spiritual and amazing power to be reckoned with.

Q: There are a lot of women who don't have children. You don't have to go through the actual physicality of it to experience it spiritually, because there is a connection within women. . . . I think all women are basically nurturers. . . . The experience of childbirth is a reminder that the physical is just as important for your spirituality as your soul, because it's all part of the same cycle.

These interviewees believe that women share spiritual meaning in their ability to create new life. One interviewee who is a medical doctor talked about women's intrinsic creative power and potential.

Some interviewees talked about how the patriarchal society prefers a son to a daughter.

A: I am the first one among three daughters in my family. My father really wanted a son. He bothered my mother and blamed her. . . . He always complained that girls were worthless. . . . I was so frustrated. I was just little girl. I could not change my sex.

O: I have three daughters. When I had the first daughter, many people came and celebrated. When the second daughter came, fewer people came. They said, "Don't worry. The next child will be a boy." The third was a daughter. Nobody came. Girls are not welcome in the family. Sons are considered to be your wealth because they pay money, they give security to their parents. Parents do not want to invest money in their daughters. A majority of the people still think that if you don't have a son, it's a curse from God.

Although the male determines the gender of the fetus, women took all of the responsibility for having or not having a son, generally the preferred sex in a patriarchal society.

An interviewee who experienced pregnancy as a teenager talked about her pain in not having anyone to talk with about her feelings and anxiety, and no one to nurture her spiritually.

H: I was 17 when I had my daughter. My life kind of seemed to go down hill from there. It was the most horrifying thing I ever went through. . . . My mother really didn't help too much. . . . I was never able to talk with anyone. I tried talking to a minister and he looked down on me. I felt pushed away because I was a pregnant teenager. . . . That day I turned my back on God. My pregnancy without God was very difficult.

Unexpected pregnancy was a challenging experience for H as a teenager. Her story shows the possibility of experiencing the creative power of pregnancy in a destructive way. She also points out the insensitivity of the Christian community when she needed special care for her bodily and spiritual crises.

The life-giving power of their bodies evoked a great spiritual experience for most of the women interviewed. Women who had born children felt closer to God during the pregnancy and believed that God protected them through this period. Women who did not experience physical birth also emphasized the spiritual meanings of pregnancy and childbirth. The experience of having another life inside their bodies, or having that potential, gives women a sense of fullness in their creative lives.

### Mothering

Mothering is a very spiritual experience for women. However, mothering is very hard work and a challenging experience. Women who had already reared their children



recalled mothering as a spiritual and joyful experience. However, those women presently rearing children described their hard work and their ambivalent feelings regarding motherhood.

**I:** Spiritually, the best part of my life has been my marriage and my children. Absolutely. I have to say that the best things in anyone's life are the love of your spouse, the love that your children have for you because they're innocent and they need you and you need them. . . . They keep you focused on what's good in life and you thank God for every moment you have with them.

**Q:** I can see the Holy Spirit through the children, the way they make me feel, the things that they say. Having small children, it's important for me to know who I am spiritually so that I can be a guide for them, too.

Two interviewees really enjoyed their mothering and found spiritual meaning in mothering. The experience of nurturing and caring for children is a powerful spiritual experience for them.

Sometimes, mothering reminds a woman of her own relationship with her mother.

One interviewee remembered her mother's abusiveness because of her mental problem.

**I:** When you bring up your child, in the day to day things, you sometimes have flashbacks to your own upbringing. My mother was a little abusive. I don't know if it was because of her depression or if she thought she was allowed to do that because your kid is like a possession. . . . I don't want to make her mistakes. Maybe I'll make my own mistakes but I will not repeat what she did. I doubly enjoyed raising my children because I could give them what I didn't have.

This interviewee's mother was mildly abusive and had difficulty in mothering because her mother was a victim of the Nazi holocaust. She wants to give her children the special care and nurturing that she did not get from her own mother.

Some interviewees complained about the many roles of women: mother, wife, homemaker, and more.

**E:** Breast feeding didn't work for me. It hurt like crazy. . . . It was a lot of hard work having a baby. I'm not like parents who want to have a whole bunch. It's a lot of

work. . . . I'm paranoid. I'm always thinking someone's going to take my child, molest my child. . . . It's too much work.

F: Right now, being a mother and running a household, cleaning, chores, grocery shopping, post office, getting children to the school bus on time, and packing lunches and having dinner ready by 5:30 and all that a mother is expected and required to do, plus answering the phone for our business and making sure that contractors are ready, by the time that 8, 9 o'clock comes at night, we are pooped beyond pooped.

H: It's a very hard life for women now. Women have to go out and get jobs. Women need to rely on day care centers. One of the problems with day care is that you never know about these people. You watch the news and [see what] these day care people are actually doing to children. Growing up, we didn't have that problem. If my grandmother was out of the house for the day, there were ten women in the neighborhood who kept a very close eye on us. . . . Growing up, we had Jesus. We were always in church. Children really need that.

These interviewees honestly expressed their feelings of being overworked mothers who expended all their energy in taking care of children and keeping house. They felt that they were missing something in their own lives from the time of their children's births.

One interviewee talked about the difficulty of working mothers who send their children to a day care center while they work outside of the home. She remembered how the community shared the tasks of mothering in her childhood.

Some interviewees were also conscious of their responsibility to rear children in their faith tradition. They talked about their spiritual mothering.

F: My husband works 6 days a week, so the seventh day which is Sunday, my husband rests. But he rests with my two sons so they can enjoy seeing their father for one whole day. I lose taking them to Sunday school because that would be a whole morning away from their father. I have to justify what is more important to my two children. . . . It is tough when your spouse is not a church person.

H: Children need to learn at a very young age that there is a God. Without that knowledge and belief and faith, our kids are in for a lot of trouble. . . . My granddaughter goes to Sunday school and she know all about Jesus. We don't pound it into her head, we don't preach to her. We bring it to her at seven year old level.

I: It's interesting watching my children deal with their spiritual upbringing, their

Jewish heritage. My oldest son has entered the stage where he has problems with religion in general, maybe there's no God at all. It's not that he rejects religion but he doesn't think it's something he needs at the moment. But he is an adult and I have to respect that I have to let him work it out for himself. He'll figure it out one day.

These interviewees want to raise their children in faith, but recognize the challenges, especially when another parent is not supportive or when children wrestle with questions and doubts, which need to be respected.

Like pregnancy and childbirth, mothering itself is a spiritual experience for most interviewees. One of the most obvious spiritual practices on the path of mothering is the growth of the women's ability to nurture. Through the caring relationships they established with children, interviewees discerned the presence of God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit in their lives. They felt the love of God for them as they cared for their children. Interviewees whose children were grown especially remembered mothering as a beautiful spiritual experience (I, Q). The interviewees missed that mothering period after their children grew up and left home. They missed the moments when their children were totally dependent on them in love and trust.

In summary, mothering is one of the greatest sources of spiritual awareness of God's love and caring. Nevertheless, mothers are physically and emotionally exhausted by the enormous amount of caring labor and by social ideals of motherly self-sacrifice. Interviewees described many responsibilities such as feeding their children, sending them to school, and teaching their children to have an ethnic identity and religion. People often believe that mothering is natural, and a mother's self-sacrifice comes from her instinct; however, motherhood is challenging for many, especially the young mothers with young children (E, F). Society constantly exhorts a woman to be a "good mother" without

considering the cost to her of sacrificing her life for others. When husbands do not share the responsibilities of parenting, many mothers have a hard time performing all the responsibilities by themselves. Mothers also yearn for spiritual nurturing, which gives support and enables them to raise their children spiritually.

### Aging and Menopause

Most interviewees hardly connect their aging or menopause with spirituality. One woman said that human faith could be more mature and stronger as people got older and experienced more things. Another woman who saw her mother's pain during menopause talked about positive acceptance of this new experience in a woman's life cycle.

G: I guess in 10 years or so, I'll be going through menopause. That's kind of sad because I will no longer have the reproductive powers to have a child and my body changes physiologically and I am getting older. But that was the cycle that created for us and there's a purpose for that.

J: As you get older and experience more things, I think your faith becomes stronger. It guides you. You begin to straighten up. You stop to think more than when you were younger before you say things.

L: A lot of women after menopause become more faithful. I don't know what that is. But women who are in their fifties and beyond, have more faith and a better level of understanding. . . .

P: Within the next few years I am going into menopause. When my mother went through it, she became extremely suicidal and she lost all connection with God and everything spiritual. Her generation felt that [after menopause] she would no longer be beneficial to society. If you are not a child-bearer, what use are you. . . . But, [with the changes today in] medication and psychology, and with women speaking openly about what happens to them cyclically, we realize that it's not an end but a new phase of life.

These four interviewees tried to think about menopause and aging positively. They argued that women develop a deeper faith and become wise as they get older. One of them regards menopause as a new phase of her life.

The over-50-year-old category of women comprised a small proportion of the interviewees in this study (J, T). Only four women spoke about menopause and aging. Two interviewees mentioned the social idea of judging woman's value by her reproductive power (G, P), as P's reflection on her mother's difficult time during menopause. In P's view, women need to prepare for menopause so they can experience it as a new beginning. In her opinion, hormonal replacement, medication and sharing of their experiences will help women better accept menopause as a natural part of women's cyclical lives.

Menopause and aging are normal parts of a woman's life cycle. Women go through emotional crises and physical changes. Spiritual practices, such as meditation and sharing their physical and emotional changes, help women accept menopause and aging as a natural part of a women's life cycle. Women may more positively affirm new life experience based on their living wisdom.

In all of this analysis of the interview data, the interviewees generally had a difficult time connecting their bodily experiences with their spirituality. Seminarians theoretically spoke of embodied spirituality, but they also noted the difficulties in speaking about their own bodily experiences in relation to their spiritual journeys. Religious and parental teachings influenced their understandings of bodily experiences. At the same time, lesbian women more clearly presented a spiritual understanding of sexuality.

Even though most interviewees had a hard time finding spiritual meaning in menstruation and sexuality, most of the women shared a spiritual understanding of pregnancy and childbirth. Women of color had some particular body-consciousness as well; they often grew up with negative body images and struggled against racist society.

Some interviewees also mentioned connections between women's deepening faith and their aging bodies.

### Relationships with Family and Others

At the beginning of telling stories about their embodied spiritual growth, most interviewees described their family backgrounds and the family members who strongly influenced them. The women found their own identities in relationships with their family members. In their stories, they explored how their personalities and spiritualities were formed in these relationships.

Most of the interviewees came from families with strong religious backgrounds.

**B:** I was raised in a Southern Baptist home. Very strict, Christian fundamental home.

**C:** We have always been raised in the church. My father's parents were very strict about their church upbringing. My mother has always been active in church and got us involved in church.

**E:** I was born a Catholic. My parents were Catholic, their parents and so on. And I was baptized Catholic so I went to a Catholic private school in New York. We always believed in God.

**F:** We were a family very oriented to church and Sunday school. We were never able to escape going to church and to Sunday school. I enjoyed participating in church events.

**I:** Judaism was a very big part of who we were as a family. My brother went to Yeshiva, a Jewish education school, and I did not because in the Jewish family, the male is more important.

**J:** Black people have always been very religious people. And that comes from slavery times when that's all they had to depend on. So, it is instilled in us.

**O:** My father was a minister, my grandfather was also a minister. Our home environment was such that I was very much attached to the church and a very active member of the youth group.

**P:** My family members would tell me, "You come from a family that has always

wanted to pursue ministry and religion. Your grandmother built the church. She funded it and she built it.” My other grandmother also wanted to be in ministry but because she was a woman she couldn’t. . . . Through my own karma and their spirits, perhaps they are saying, “you can do it for us.” I feel like I have the very strong female archetypal push within me so it makes me not afraid to challenge the church.

These women described their families as strict, conservative, religious oriented, fundamental, or active Christians. Religious teachings and nurturing within the family provided spiritual foundations for them. Some of them emphasized their heritage, such as Jewish or Black heritage. One interviewee finds her spiritual heritage in her grandmothers’ spiritual journeys.

Some interviewees talked about how family members influenced their personalities, sex-roles, beliefs and life-styles.

**B:** My mom had a kind of schizophrenia, which is true to southern women. Southern women are very strong and they actually run the household, they are the backbone of the family. Yet, when it came to religion, she was a little bit more conservative.

**C:** I had a very male oriented role model. I did not have a really good relationship with my mom. I tried so hard not to be like her in every way. So, if there was anything that felt feminine, I felt like I had to not do that because it would remind me of her.

**T:** My grandmothers were both independent women. They did things that not every woman did. One of my grandmothers smoked. That was unusual. My other grandmother wore slacks or pants in the early 1940s when most women didn’t. So, they were in fact people who didn’t abide by the norms. I probably picked up some of that.

These interviewees expressed particularly strong influences from their mothers, some of which were negative and many of which keenly influenced their personalities, sex-roles, and beliefs.

A Jewish woman talked about how her mother’s mental depression influenced her life. She remembered growing up in a depressive atmosphere.

I: My parents were not holocaust victims, in the sense of being imprisoned. But they did have to leave their homes and make a new life in America. . . . So, growing up I remember a very depressive atmosphere in terms of finances and what the future would be. . . . My mother was mentally depressed. Our whole [family went through the] cycle when she would be well and when she would be down. . . . I can't say that we had a spiritual leader that helped us in that regard.

Half of the interviewees think of themselves as peacemakers in their family, bridging relationships between parents, and between parents and siblings, especially in times of trouble. Even though some other women did not name themselves peacemakers, they expressed care for their sisters and brothers.

A: In my family, I am a peacemaker. Lots of time, I try to make sure that everybody gets what they want. . . . It seems I like to take care of everybody.

F: My three brothers come and go as they please and life is grand for them. As a woman, it seems I have to take on all of the responsibility, the ups and downs of family problems.

R: After I graduated, I was supposed to go to a Catholic college, but during that summer, my father decided that we couldn't afford it. My mother and father did not get along well and I was the peacemaker in my family.

O: When I was studying for a Masters degree in Education, I wanted to study more about children's psychology because my younger sister is handicapped. We didn't know what mental retardation is or how we could help. She is not accepted as fully "human" in this society. She is discriminated against in the education system. We tend to look at people's outward beauty not their inward beauty.

S: When my brother came out as a gay person, it was devastating to my family. He was kicked out of our house for three years. For the first year I was worried he was going to hell. That began a spiritual journey for me that was probably ten years long.

These interviewees expressed care and commitment to peacemaking- a common theme among all the interviewees.

While women often identified themselves in relationship with their family members, they also said that they wanted to have their own identity.

O: I have no identity of my own. I am the bishop's wife saying this, the pastor's wife



saying that. So, I cannot do anything I want to do. This made me very uncomfortable.

**S:** Differentiating from my family was a very difficult and long process. I'm a first generation person born to immigrants. So, I felt I was not only differentiating from my parents but also from my parents' parents. I really had to learn to trust myself.

Differentiating from family and finding their own identity was difficult for these women, complicated by a husband's social status and a family's experience of immigration.

Some of interviewees also try to find their ethnic identity.

**C:** I've been exploring other parts of my identity. There's strong Native-American heritage in our family. I've been exploring what it means to be Black and Indian. . . . There are similarities and overlaps. It's necessary [in order] for me to be a whole person.

**H:** Both parents are Native Americans. And part of us is African American. And I find it, personally, interesting to learn about the Native Americans but not just one tribe, about all the tribes. I'm also trying to learn my African heritage.

These two interviewees emphasized the importance of ethnic identity to their identity as whole persons.

Some interviewees also described their present relationships as challenging for their spiritual journey.

**D:** I used to always follow other's needs. I could hardly say "no" to others. I did not know what I wanted, what my priority was. I want to be honest and respect myself, my own needs.

**E:** I get hurt very easily. I have to fight with myself not to be selfish. Just me, me, me. So I have to give myself more to other people and not expect other people to always be nice to me.

**M:** I think the most challenging moment all along is to be honest with people about what I believe and who I am. . . . Just being honest with myself and others.

The interviewee who experienced sexual abuse talked about how difficult it was to respond to her own needs. One woman talked about emotional pain in relationship with

others and her struggles not to be selfish. The other interviewee expressed how difficult it was to be honest with people.

Some women saw conflict with or separation from their boyfriends as a spiritual crisis.

**B:** Breaking up with my boyfriend, whom I dearly loved, was a self-destructive time for me. I didn't know God anymore. . . . I was almost suicidal.

**K:** In college, after being in a relationship with a man for a year and a half, he suddenly broke it off. I went into absolute shock. My faith suddenly got the wind beaten out of it. I felt so completely empty, alone, broken, and hurt and bruised.

These two interviewees said that the time of breaking up a relationship with someone whom they loved was a challenging experience in their spiritual journeys.

Women often described suffering from too many roles and responsibilities in their homes.

**F:** It just seems written in stone somewhere that the woman needs to take care of all the problems, all the chores. I don't find it written in stone that the male can participate, help out, cry. . . . It's the woman's responsibility to do everything.

**H:** I get up in the morning and I go to work and then I come home and go grocery shopping and cook dinner, clean the house. . . . My husband comes home and takes out the garbage and he lays back and reads. . . . Everyday life for women is very hard.

**J:** I always worked. Get up in the morning. Get them ready for school. Most of time I worked at night. . . . We just kept rolling on the same way.

**O:** For me, it was not easy to come here. To leave my work and come here. There's a break in my family, my children are here and my husband is in Pakistan. We are sort of a broken family. When we talk about women's education, we have to develop models, new ways of doing things so that we do not have to sacrifice.

**T:** In our culture, we are given scripts that the female is to be a mother, to stay at home, to take care of, to nurture people and not to question it. . . . Up until 1981, I [followed] the script because I didn't know how to do anything else, how to change from that script to a life where I was choosing what to do.

Many interviewees complained about women's many roles in their family. Even though women work outside like their husband, they take too many responsibilities at home.

They want to share many responsibilities with their husband.

Some women tell their difficulties as women in a patriarchal society.

G: My nationality is Spanish, and women are considered second class citizens in that culture where men dominate. I went into a profession where I had to learn through my own journey that I am smart, that my opinions do count and that I can make a difference, and to help other women see that.

This Spanish woman talked about her journey in a male-dominated society.

Summarizing the relational themes, family is very important as a foundation of faith.

Most interviewees began to tell stories about their spiritual journey by describing their family backgrounds and the family members who strongly influenced them. They described that their family members influenced their personalities, beliefs and life-styles. Many interviewees wanted to care for their families and to respond to the needs of their family members. Parental teachings profoundly influenced their understandings of their bodies and sexuality. Mothers' attitude toward their bodies and sexuality profoundly influenced their daughters' thinking. Many interviewees did not experience mothering that helped them explore their authentic sexuality and recognize the sacredness of female sexuality.

### Images and Relationships with God

Many of the interviewees had male images of God when they grew up in conservative Christian families; however, some women began to mistrust the Father image of God. Some women also developed a mother image of God. An Afro-American woman told

that the Holy Spirit is more powerful for her than God, who is always on the side of oppressors. This broad range of images and experiences reveals considerable diversity.

Some interviewees expressed no problem with male images of God. They feel safety with the powerful male images of God.

**F:** My image of God is what I've learned through my church, seeing pictures of God as a male with long hair and white robe. My image of God is a very calm, relaxed, laid back person who has ears to listen.

**G:** I don't have a problem with the fact that God is referred to in the masculine gender. Actually that makes me feel very safe. Maybe that's part of our culture that men should take care of us or that our fathers took care of us when we were little girls. I really view God as a heavenly Father who can protect you. I don't feel that I would want to view God as a woman. First of all, the Bible doesn't speak of God as a woman, it talks about Him in a masculine sense.

**H:** He can't do anything wrong. There's no way that God can do anything wrong because if He did we wouldn't be here. He wouldn't have created anything that we see.

**T:** God has been very real for me. He has answered my prayers. He has revealed His character in some way. To me, God is still a Father. We have lots of concern about the language of God today, but to me the "Father" image is okay.

For these interviewees, the male images of God, especially the Father image of God, are powerful images in their spiritual lives.

Some other women were uncomfortable with the Father image of God because of their personal experiences, such as their relationship with their fathers, husbands, pastors, or sexual abusers.

**A:** People will say that it's just like your father but I don't think so. Of course He is better than my biological father. I think He is worthy and compassionate and maybe tender. He knows my needs. When I am weak, He is strong. I think tender, compassion, consideration, those words are female image.

**C:** The pastor was having several affairs in the church with different women. . . . He was a father figure and I couldn't deal with it. So, I stopped going to church. God Father began to irritate me. The words of submission in hymnals irritate me.

**D:** I thought about God a lot, but I did not have any personal and emotional relationship with God. God is always far from me. Where was God when I was sexually abused and raped? I do not know. I do not want to say that God suffers with me. God may be ashamed of me.

**F:** God to me is a male figure, but I can't say that he's a father figure. My father and I always butted heads in every kind of situation.

**R:** During the period I was going through divorce, I came closer to God. But then it became hard for me to pray to a male God. . . . Suddenly the idea that God was male did not work for me any longer. . . .

Interviewees who do not have good relationship with their fathers were more uncomfortable with the Father image of God. For example, the interviewee who experienced her husband's sexual affairs with other woman rejected male images of God. Interviewees who experienced sexual abuse also rejected the male images of God and had anger toward God for leaving them unprotected from sexual abuse.

Some women claimed the Mother image of God or other female images of God.

**B:** The women I lived with had different spiritualities, different ways of imaging God. They showed me portions of the Bible that spoke of mothering images of God. . . . And I thought, "Yes, God can be a Mother." All the guilt of the Southern Baptist fundamentalism got stripped away. I like the image of the birthing God. In African traditional religion, they have this beautiful picture of a birthing god where she sits on a birthing stool. She brings before her the spirit of those who are going to be born. She asks, "What do you want to be, a boy or girl? or Where do you want to live? What do you want your life to be? It's God cooperating with this mother in birthing this creation.

**P:** Some women need to read that God is He and that's fine. I alternate He with She sometimes when I am reading. I feel more empowered when I allow myself to read God as She to make it more holistic. And in my sexuality, I feel in solidarity with other women because of being a lesbian.

**Q:** God being Mother, not in sense of gender but more with the characteristics of the mother. Someone who's nurturing. Someone who is gentle. Someone who is there during the hurt, the downtimes, the uptimes.

For these interviewees, the female images of God, especially the Mother image, are

empowering and nurturing in their spiritual lives.

Some interviewees were more comfortable to understand God as Spirit.

I: I believe there's a god in everybody. God is not "He" necessarily. God is goodness in everybody's heart. So, when you love somebody, when you give, volunteer, do charitable things, that's part of God. It's a spiritual feeling.

J: To me God is Spirit. He is everything, does everything, takes care of everything. He is God. Prayer is asking God to help you. God is everything good and hopeful. You don't compare him with anybody.

Q: For Black people, the Holy Spirit was something very real because the God who was held up before us didn't look like us, wasn't someone we could relate to because we were the oppressed ones. But the Holy Spirit gave you the power to rise up above that. It was a power, a strength, that you called on to help you through, to help you rise above any oppressive situations in your life, a power that told me that I was somebody, I can be somebody, I can be whoever I want to be.

These interviewees imaged God as Spirit, rather than male or female, and they emphasized God's spiritual presence in their lives.

Most of the interviewees grew up in a Christian family. They had male images of God and internalized patriarchal beliefs. For some of the interviewees, the male images of God, especially the image of "Father," make them feel safe. For some interviewees, the male images of God were challenged by their destructive relationships with their father, husband, pastor, or a sexual abuser. The images of God are based on women's embodied relationship with the divine and others. Negative or oppressive experiences with men challenged male images of God. Some interviewees, especially seminarians, had explored mother or female images of God. For them, the image of God as mother is a more nurturing and empowering image. Feminist theology may help seminarians to question and challenge the received male images of God and search for new images and symbols of God.

### Experience in Church and Christianity

When I asked about the most challenging experiences on their spiritual journeys, some women talked about their frustrating experiences in church. They talked about how church exclusively gave the leadership to men. Even though women wanted to respond to God's calling, the church restricted women's role in church. Some women want to challenge the understanding of leadership, exclusive male language, and hatred of women in the institutional church. Women's stories show how churches can influence women's embodied spiritual journeys in many diverse ways.

Interviewees have different denominational backgrounds. Their stories show how church beliefs and system have influenced their embodied spirituality. They talked about biblical and church teachings of the nature and roles of women.

E: In the book of Genesis, when Eve sins, God tells her because of her sin, she's going to have labor pains, she's going to be dominated by her husband. I feel that women have it harder because of what is related in the Bible. . . . It's part of life for all women. Women have to suffer because of what Eve did.

G: In most religions and in Jehovah's Witnesses, men have the position of authority. They are the elders. You don't have women elders. The Bible tells you that the head of the wife is the man, and the head of the man is Christ and the head of Christ is God.

Two interviewees talked about Eve's fall, woman's labor pain as the result of sin, and woman's position in church and family. They believed that their understandings of woman's nature and secondary position are biblical teachings.

Interviewees involved in less dogmatic churches did not much trouble with patriarchal teachings in Christianity.

K: My faith experience is tied into the faith within the Unitarian church. It doesn't have a dogma. We're really religious in the sense that we believe in the inherent worth and dignity of everyone and we respect many different religious traditions. . . .

**N:** For me that division between the body and the spirit hasn't been extreme. I wasn't raised in any organized religion. I never was indoctrinated or taught anything about the body being bad or not being connected to God. So for me it hasn't been difficult to reconcile God and the body.

These interviewees' understandings of woman's nature, woman's body, and woman's position in church and family have been influenced by the open teachings of the churches in which they are involved.

Some women expressed their disappointment and frustration in a male-dominated church. Some women, for example, complained about the lack of concern for women's bodily experiences in church teachings.

**B:** I've been fed in church that we are Eve, we are the temptress, we seduced Adam, we are bad, we are evil. When you hear that Sunday after Sunday, Wednesday after Wednesday, it gets in there. . . . It was very male oriented. When I was sixteen, I made a commitment to full-time Christian service. And my youth pastor said, "Maybe you'll be a pastor's wife." That was my option.

**M:** My church was very conservative. It didn't allow women to teach men, they could teach children and maybe youth but women were not allowed to be leaders in the church. I started rejecting a lot of teachings and that was painful. I thought I would be rejecting the people that I cared about.

**P:** I grew up in Greece. They had incredible spirituality but the religion, the dogma, the creed, I found very oppressive. I remember it felt very male because the Archbishop always had a lot of men around him. The women would wash the church, sweep the church, make bread and feed the priests and monks. It seemed very oppressive.

Many interviewees reported that their church teachings are negative and discriminating against women. When the denomination is conservative and strict about women's roles and nature, women are more challenged spiritually.

These issues are raised by laywomen, who question unequal relationships between men and women in church and the understanding of women's nature.

**C:** I had a few experiences working in the church and a struggle working with male



Pastors [who felt] envy and jealousy of a competent female younger than they. . . . As I reformulate what I have faith in, [I ask] how can I be a part of the church to make it better so that people who have issues like mine can continue to be a part of it.

I: I don't necessarily think that women were put here as punishment. I think men always want to be superior. In the Orthodox Jewish religion, women are important, but it's the men who are allowed to study. They can be closer to God. One day we will all be equal. . . . If religion looks down on you and your husband looks down on you, how can you grow? Then how can you give a better life to your child?

These interviewees are critical about patriarchal beliefs and church system. The interviewees think that men do not want to share their power and roles with women.

Similar to the laywomen, most seminarians described that one of the challenging experiences in their spiritual journeys was involvement in the institutional church.

L: I'm pretty clear I don't like the institutional church. We are told by the Christian church that we need to be quiet, that we are the bad sex, we are the ones that caused the fall. . . . The most challenging thing has been me fighting with God about Christianity in particular and what it means to consider myself Christian and believe in a Christian God, when Christianity has been used as this incredibly oppressive, destructive, imperialistic, capitalistic force in the world.

O: The hierarchy in churches is very uncomfortable for me. They always try to dominate women. . . . The Bishop said, "If women get a theological education, next will be the ordination of women." The present church's leadership doesn't want to share with women. Unless more women do theology, it will be difficult to speak as equals with men in the church.

P: My goal in life has always been to be an Orthodox priest but I can't because I am a woman and a lesbian-so there's double repression. . . . Why don't I have access to God? Because of my body and because of my sexuality. I have always believed that Christ has guided and embraced me, but the institution does not.

R: Going to church is the biggest challenge because the language is so sexist. Especially in a Catholic mass, we use a lot of male language. I try to let the priests know that this is a problem and they are sympathetic, but they are not moving [to change] fast enough.

These seminarians challenged the negative understandings of woman's body and roles, exclusive male images of God, exclusive male leadership, and insensitivity to women's

embodied experiences in church.

In summary, Christian teachings and experiences in church influenced interviewees' embodied spiritual journeys. Patriarchal beliefs and structures in Christianity negatively influenced women's understandings of woman's nature and bodily experiences. Many interviewees talked about their frustrating and alienating experiences in the patriarchal church. They decried how church exclusively gives leadership to men and restricts women's roles. The women who were involved in less conservative denominations described more freedom to explore their spirituality and call to ministry. Even though some laywomen clarified with precision the problems in patriarchal belief structures and church systems, they only partially recognized the negative understandings of woman's nature in Christian beliefs and the unequal relationship of privilege and power between men and women in the church. Seminarians who were oriented to feminist theology actively challenged patriarchal Christian tradition, and searched for an alternative way to nurture their own spirituality. They wanted to challenge the authoritarian leadership of male clergy, exclusive male language, and women's constrained participation in church leadership activities.

#### Understandings of Spiritual Journey and Growth

Most interviewees said that the most nurturing moments of their spiritual journey were sharing experiences in relationship with others. Most of them described their daily lives as spiritual journeys. They understand that women's spiritual journeys are always up and down.

H: Faith is hard to come by. It's not something that you get the moment you accept Christ. That's not the way it works. . . . Faith is very hard. It's not something that we develop. It's something that you have to learn every day. . . .

I: God is number one and you have to let it work for you in your everyday life. There are challenges constantly that could wreck your faith but then other things happen that make your faith stronger.

L: Starting or ending a job or having a child or being in a car accident or losing someone close to you--these things all test our faith. We need [times of] doubt because through that we can find our relationship with God.

O: Life is constant struggle and perseverance is what matters in every struggle and every success. Whatever we achieve, we cannot do it on our own. Unless we strongly come together, we cannot see the beauty of life.

P: Everyday there is another obstacle and another awareness of who I am as a woman and how that relates to my spirituality.

Q: My spiritual journey is one that I feel starts over every day. Every day I struggle to get in touch with the spiritual. What is most important is loving one another, reaching out, helping others.

S: Life is about loving. If it's really love, it produces a creative light. Whether it's making love and creating a child or loving through your job or loving friends. . . Creating social justice in different ways. It's a different way of thinking about women's power. . . . Every person has her own voice. A voice teacher helps the student find her own voice.

Not one of these women believes that faith is a fixed entity or possession. They believe that their faith or spirituality is changing daily.

Many interviewees expressed that faith or spiritual growth is not hierarchical development; neither is it a road upward.

D: I think that we cannot say the development of faith. Our faith is always up and down. The changing of perspective can be thought of as the maturing of faith.

E: Everything I do in my daily life relates to my faith. Without my faith, I feel I have nothing. . . . So, my life is basically my faith. We have days when we're down, days we're depressed but we just can't let it dominate us.

F: God said the road will never be smooth. He said there would be ups and downs [as it is] with menstrual times and childbirth. God only puts on your shoulder as much as He thinks that you can handle and carry. . . .

These interviewees do not think that their faith grows up toward a higher level; rather

their faith is always up and down with life experiences. One laywoman compares the up and down with faith experiences to menstrual times and childbirth

As discussed earlier, many interviewees presented their understandings of the spiritual meanings of women's bodies and bodily experiences.

D: Woman's dignity comes from her body. If woman's body is controlled or violated, she cannot keep her faith, her trust in God. Women need to keep their boundaries and to control their own bodies. My sexual journey is a faith journey. The healing process from sexual abuse is a spiritual journey for me.

G: Women are incredibly made. We have a monthly menstrual cycle; we have the capacity to have children. If you get in touch with who gave us this ability, we will appreciate that this is a supreme being. It will put us in touch with our spirituality. . . . Our spiritual journey in touch with our body cycles should be one of great rejoicing.

H: Since I gave my life to Christ and learned to have faith, I take better care of my body because the scriptures tell us that our body is our temple, our body is God's temple and we are supposed to take care of that.

I: The spiritual thing is a bodily thing that you give each other, the affection, being committed to each other, giving physical love, emotional love.

K: I've never really had a problem experiencing my body in my relationship with God. Singing for me is very much a bodily experience. I'm comfortable touching myself or just being with myself or letting people touch me or dancing and singing.

L: Regarding our experience of God, specially in women's life cycles, I think there's definitely something to that. I don't know how it works and I haven't really thought about it much.

N: When I first came into connection with God in my sobriety, the truth of my body and the violations of my pain, of my anger, had to be dealt with and healed. When I'm able to be present in my body, I can also more fully experience God in a very personal way.

R: What's exciting for me now is that I'm very interested in the embodiment of spirituality and in the connection between the spirit and body.

Even though many interviewees find it hard to talk about the spiritual meanings of their bodily experiences, they recognize the embodiment of women's spirituality and the

sacredness of women's bodies.

Some women described their images of spiritual growth as a flower or puzzle.

B: I think I'm still pretty much conservative but was like flower just starting to open up to different possibilities. I was kind of like a new rose that just starts to open a little bit. . . . You know, you can't just think about these things, you need a voice in order to make a difference in our society, in the academy and the thing that we live in and breath in everyday.

H: Even though I am 41 years old, in my faith I'm just starting to blossom as a flower. For years I was a woman whose faith was a bud, a little flower bud that just couldn't Open. You could water it and give it plenty of plant food and sunshine, you could pamper it but it was not going to open. The faith is what brings [me] to life.

E: It's like I have a puzzle. I have all these questions in my life and as I ask these questions, sometimes I may get the answer but not understand it immediately. . . . I get more fulfilled spiritually when my puzzle gets more completed. My puzzle is not completed yet. My fulfillment is filling in that puzzle.

Their image of a flower is different from the traditional idea of a flower that symbolizes women as the objects of male sexual desire. For them, as woman lives spiritually with her own voice each day, the flower opens more and more, and finally reaches full blossom. Another interviewee described her spiritual journey as "doing a puzzle." Women have diverse experiences and many questions about the meaning of their life experiences.

Many interviewees expressed that a spiritual journey is not a personal faith journey, but a communal process nurtured and created in relationships with others.

B: The wonderful women I lived with in the dorm were from different spiritualities. . . . Our community and our friendship kept growing. These women are a strong source of my spirituality. I truly felt that I discovered God in these women.

D: I was involved in a women's group. I realized the many women in the group had experienced sexual abuse. I began to realize that sexual abuse happened in my life, but I did not know how to name it. Through the group, I learned how to name my sexual abuse. . . . I also learned that life is loving. Love always produces creativity. Making love and creating a child or loving through your job, loving friend, and

creating social justice, whatever different ways.

O: The women were exploited by the middleman in business. . . . So, we started a women's program, to give education to women, to give them a skill or vocational training. They learned how to market their own goods. Now, they have confidence in themselves, and they walk with dignity. They have self-esteem.

P: I am willing to be the nail that sticks up in order to be pounded back into place. I have chosen to accept that challenge. . . . Because I have the support of so many women. They say, "Do it for all of us. Be who you are as a woman, fully in your sexuality, because we back you." Most of the times I'm able to hold hands with my sisters and move forward.

These interviewees shared nurturing and empowering experiences in women's communities. They learned diverse spiritualities and experiences in the communities. Through strong bonding among women, they found their dignity and gifts, and challenged patriarchal society. One interviewee described that she learned how to "name" her experience of sexual abuse in a women's group. Another, a seminarian, said that she could not live her spiritual journey and ministry without the support of other women.

Some women focus on political issues, such as heterosexism, racism, sexism, and classism, in their spiritual journeys.

H: Society has pushed Asian people, because of their customs and their clothing, into a corner. . . . You have to learn about others before you can say "I don't like them." God didn't make us to do that. Society is losing out. We are all creations of God.

L: In the church, I work with women who are feeling the need to follow Christ without denial of their sexuality. Lesbian and bisexual women experience a lot of pain and abuse [either] from others or self-inflicted because of shame and ambivalence. A lot of my work is about healing the relationship of body to God.

N: My struggle is with society that uses sexism, racism, classism to deny the sacredness of the connection to the body and spirituality. . . .

O: Our education system segregates the rich from poor, man from woman, from people who are economically better from those who are [poor].

These interviewees described their painful experiences and struggling in sexist, racist, and heterosexist society and Christian community. Through their experiences, they have formed their visions of spiritual healing and justice.

In summary, the interviewees presented diverse understandings of spiritual growth and spiritual journey. Many interviewees recognized the dignity, sacredness, and beauty of woman's body and spiritual meanings of woman's bodily experiences. However, they hardly connected their own specific bodily experiences with their spiritual growth. When seminarians theologically explained embodied spirituality, they were clear about what embodied spirituality means. However, they became less clear when they talked about their own bodily experiences in relation to their personal spiritual journey. Feminist theology helps women to be aware of the importance of women's bodily experiences, but it is not easy to embody the theory in their lives and to name their own embodied experiences. While most of women did not specify the importance of their own bodily experiences in their spiritual growth, two lesbian women clearly represented the sacred connection of their spirituality with their bodies and sexuality.

Most interviewees described their spiritual journey as an everyday struggle. They believed that everything they did in their daily lives and all relationships with others was related to their faith and spirituality. For them, spiritual practices include caring for and loving others, making a safe and loving place for others, and meditating on the relationship with God and the Spirit. Some interviewees focused on political issues such as heterosexism, racism, sexism, and classism as it affects their spiritual journey. Many interviewees felt that the most nurturing experiences of their spiritual journeys were sharing and nurturing experiences in personal and communal relationships with other

women. Women need spiritual companions to share their stories, feelings, and conflicts.

### Conclusion

Through the narrative research, interviewees told their spiritual journeys in relation to their bodily experiences. Most of the women found it hard to begin the story-telling about their bodily experiences, but they tried to find the spiritual meanings of their bodily experiences in women's life cycles. Church teaching and parental teaching influenced their understandings of women's bodies and bodily experiences in both positive and negative ways. Interviewees also understood their spiritual journeys as everyday struggles through their own embodied experiences. The narrative interviews actually helped them to understand more deeply women's embodied spiritual growth and to develop a feminist vision of mature spirituality of women.



## CHAPTER 6

### A Feminist Vision of Women's Embodied Spiritual Growth

For far too long, women's faith and spirituality have been defined by men from male perspectives and values. Women's spiritual growth needs to be defined from the perspective of women's embodied experiences, views, and values. Women's visions of spiritual maturity grow out of their special relationship to their own bodies, to others, to nature, and to God. The purpose of this chapter is to develop a feminist vision of women's embodied spiritual growth, drawing upon women's self-expression in the interviews and in feminist literature.

This dissertation presents a feminist vision of women's embodied spiritual growth based on women's story-telling. There is no one woman's story or experience, but rather a multitude of voices, which sometimes speak together and sometimes separately. Rosemary R. Ruether says that there is no final and definitive feminist theology, no final synthesis that encompasses all human experience.<sup>1</sup> Further, feminist vision always aims toward women's fully embodied humanization and liberation. Ruether adds that the critical principle of feminist theology is the promotion of the full humanity of women.<sup>2</sup> Whatever diminishes or denies the full humanity of women must be presumed not to reflect the divine, nor does it reflect the authentic nature of things. This dissertation will search for an alternative way of understanding women's embodied spiritual growth for women's full humanization and spiritual maturity.

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<sup>1</sup> Ruether, Sexism and God-Talk, 20.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 18-9.

In this chapter, I will describe six aspects of women's spiritual maturity: body-affirming spirituality; embodied images of God; embodied relationships with other human beings; an interdependent relationship with the world as "God's body"; involvement in the church as the "Body of Christ"; and embodied participation in social transformation. These qualities emerged from the women's interviews and were corroborated in the feminist literature. Women need constantly to search for more integral and holistic visions of women's embodied spirituality based on their own experiences.

### Body-Affirming Spirituality

The first aspect of a feminist vision of women's embodied spiritual maturity is body-affirming spirituality. Body-affirming spirituality can be defined as: awareness of one's embodiedness, respect for the sacredness of the female body, and appreciation for embodied experiences as opportunities to be transformed into a more mature faith. Even though many interviewees had difficulties in remembering embodied experiences as part of their spiritual journeys, they had a vision of body-affirming and body-grounded spiritual growth. One of them (G) said that "women are incredibly made. . . . Our spiritual journey in touch with our body cycle should be one of great rejoicing." Another interviewee (I) also said that "the spiritual thing is a bodily thing that you give each other, the affection, being committed to each other, giving physical love, emotional love." Seminarians influenced by feminist theology more strongly emphasized the importance of women's embodied experiences than laywomen. One seminarian (R) said that "what's exciting for me now is that I'm very interested in the embodiment of spirituality in the connection between the spirit and body." Another seminarian (L) also said, "regarding

our experience of God, specially in women's life cycles, I think there's definitely something to that." Feminist theology may, thus, help women to be aware of women's embodied spiritual journeys.<sup>3</sup> Based on the visions of interviewees and feminist theorists, I will construct a feminist vision of body-affirming spirituality.

A spiritually mature woman may accept, appreciate and love who she is as an embodied being. The spiritually mature woman may know how to care for and love her own body, and affirm her bodily experiences. Women's bodily experiences are not just biological givens; they are also constructed. By transforming a narrower notion of themselves in patriarchal society, women can discover a new truth of their embodied being and can participate in co-creation. Elisabeth Moltmann-Wendel, for example, insists that we do not have a body, rather that we are bodies. For her, the body takes over the will and understanding; the body is the basis of the whole. Being a body can create an experience of well-being, of being alive, a conscious experience of the rhythms of the body, the happy feeling of being at one with nature.<sup>4</sup> To be spiritually mature, women need to affirm their own bodies fully and to celebrate the goodness and sacredness of their bodies. Women need to know their deepest selves and discover inner truth by trusting their own bodies. Penelope Washbourn describes a similar feminist vision of woman's body-based experiences.

I wish to be liberated in my body. I want to be able to experience pregnancy as a glowing state--worth it for its own sake. I want to be able to live in my body and to celebrate its unique possibilities for menstruation, orgasm, pregnancy, childbirth,

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<sup>3</sup> Many feminist theorists emphasize the importance of women's embodiment in spirituality. See Raphael, Theology and Embodiment; Moltmann-Wendel, I Am My Body; Downing, Women's Mysteries; King, Women and Spirituality.

<sup>4</sup> Moltmann-Wendel, 1-2.

nursing, and menopause. I want to be a sexual body and be able to experience the fullness and potential of the female sexual structures.<sup>5</sup>

Women form their self-images through their embodied experiences. Diverse bodily experiences give women an opportunity to challenge their old images of themselves and to construct new self-images. However, many women have negative body images, and these negative body images contribute to a woman's negative self-identity. In Jewish and Christian tradition, women's bodies have often been regarded as sources of sin or temptation. The denigration of the female body is expressed in religious taboos surrounding menstruation, childbirth, and menopause in women. For instance, menstruating women were forbidden to enter the sanctuary in ancient Hebrew and Christian communities.<sup>6</sup> The interviews and literature suggest that women have not learned to love themselves and care for their own bodies. To be mature, women need to be aware of this destructive ideology and structure that contributes to misnaming and misinterpreting women's bodies.

Spiritually mature women may also seek to have a positive body image as life processes change their bodies. Many women confront a sense of dissatisfaction with their own bodies every time they open a magazine or a newspaper, or watch TV. Patriarchal aesthetics of the female body function as ideological judgments, associating beauty with specific ages, coloring, ethnicity, sexuality, affluent styles of dress, body

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<sup>5</sup> Penelope Washbourn, "My Body/My World," in *Male and Female*, eds. Ruth Tiffany Barnhouse and Urban T. Holmes III (New York: Seabury Press, 1976), 92.

<sup>6</sup> Mary Douglas explains menstrual taboo in many ancient cultures including the early church in her book, *Purity and Danger* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1966)

shape and even height.<sup>7</sup> When women fail to achieve the ideal images, they often have a negative self-image. This especially applies to women of color who can never realize the ideal American image of women. Most women of color in interviews described the difficulty of having a positive body image in this white supremacist society (E, G, J, K, Q). One of them (G) says, "I was the only Spanish girl. . . . I felt very negative about my body." Women of color internalize the negative and racist stereotypes. By making racial bodies and bodies of a certain shape profane, the dominant group justifies the marginalization of a minority.<sup>8</sup> In spite of social pressure and prejudice, women need to affirm the natural beauty of their own bodies. Spiritually mature women need to affirm and celebrate their natural beauty. Educators need especially to empower women of color to have a positive self-identity and ethnic identity and to change any environment that damages growth. They can help women of color confront their negative self-image and develop a more integrated identity. Women of color need to learn to respect and celebrate their own bodies of color and their own ethnic heritage within a White-dominant culture.

Spiritually mature women may search for creative and divine power in the experience of menstruation. In spite of the negative teaching about menstruation in church and society, some interviewees told stories about menstruation as a time of meditation and empowerment. One interviewee remembers Jesus's suffering and identifies her suffering with Jesus's suffering during her menstrual period (R). Feminist theorists also find a new

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<sup>7</sup> Raphael, 84.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 89.

consciousness about this basic female body process as a guide for their spiritual quest and as a source for spiritual insight.<sup>9</sup> Christine Downing claims that menstruation means more than the beginning of reproductive capacity; it means initiation into shared sisterhood with all who bleed. She suggests that women celebrate the sacredness of their blood and build up sisterhood among themselves.<sup>10</sup> One interviewee (P) also said, “menstruation is something we have in common. That’s an incredible bond. It has been something spiritual because it’s something that all women go through and we are very much connected to the moon and the ocean.” Women need to help one another experience menstruation as an event that marks women’s initiation into female embodiment, opening the possibility for experiencing divine creativity. One interviewee (S) experienced powerful healing and empowering by sharing her menstrual experiences in a women’s group.

One of the goals of spiritual growth is to experience sexuality as a source of unity and healing, and reunion with the experience of the sacred. Women need to learn to trust themselves and to experience their wholeness apart from men’s opinions of them. Many women have been conditioned to identify sex as a form of male domination. One interviewee (R) said, “I hadn’t realized how oppressed I was. My husband really exercised his power over me. Even a sexual relationship with him was so oppressive.” Many women internalize a sense of responsibility for men’s sexual pleasure.<sup>11</sup> Feminist

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<sup>9</sup> Culpepper, “Are Women’s Bodies Sacred,” 199.

<sup>10</sup> Downing, Women’s Mysteries, 84-85.

<sup>11</sup> According to the study of Judith V. Jordan, most women, in speaking about early sexual experience or their first sexual intercourse, talk about the importance of the relationship and about the boy’s initiative and excitement. Many women felt they “gave in” sexually in order to please the boyfriend or to maintain the

theorists have attacked the sexual objectification of women in beauty contests, pin-ups and pornography and the commodification of sexuality through prostitution.<sup>12</sup> Christine E. Gudorf suggests that neither men nor women should see sexual desire, or any other bodily desire, as an enemy to be feared and controlled. People need to know with accuracy and insight the messages circulating in their bodies, to interpret them correctly, and to cooperate with them.<sup>13</sup> Women need to listen to their body messages and to act to meet their bodily needs. Gudorf proposes that accepting mutual sexual pleasure as the primary purpose of sexual activity requires respect and care for the partner and responsibility for avoiding pain.<sup>14</sup> The experience of body pleasure is important in creating the ability to trust and love others, including God. One interviewee (R) said, “God is in freedom. I have a feeling that I can discover God more fully in the sex act than I have.” Another interviewee (K) also said, “My way of spiritual exploration was definitely through sex, relating to other people.” To be mature spiritually, women need to affirm “the goodness of sexuality as embodiment, the respect for bodily integrity, and the appropriateness of self-direction and noncoercion in expressing sexuality.”<sup>15</sup>

Lesbian women have a double burden in affirming their sexuality in this heterosexual-dominant society. Society’s homophobia is internalized by all people to greater or lesser

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relationship. Judith V. Jordan, Clarity in Connection (Wellesley, Mass.: Wellesley College, Stone Center, 1987), 14.

<sup>12</sup> Stevi Jackson and Sue Scott, “Sexual Skirmishes and Feminist Factions,” in Feminism and Sexuality, eds. Stevi Jackson and Sue Scott (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 6.

<sup>13</sup> Christine E. Gudorf, Body, Sex, and Pleasure (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 1994), 87.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 139.

<sup>15</sup> Harrison, Making the Connections, 90.

degrees. Lesbians have to go through a process of rejecting society's stigmatization of homosexuality, both in terms of others' relationship with them and in terms of their own internalized negative self-judgment. Some lesbians see lovemaking between women as providing the best clue to authentic feminine sexuality. One lesbian interviewee (N) said, "Somehow physical desire and being honest and clear with that is connected to my ability to have a truthful relationship with God in and through my body." To be mature spiritually, all women, gay and straight, need to search for their authentic sexual identity and to reject any sexual pleasure or relationship that does not serve to enhance female identity and mutuality.

Women have lived with many lies about the female body and female sexuality. Maria Harris suggests that women exercise the power of disbelieving lies, including religious lies.<sup>16</sup> The role of educators is to help women stop believing lies about women's bodies and sexuality and begin exploring their authentic sexuality. The process of exploring their authentic sexuality is a life long journey. One interviewee in her late 40s (R) said that she is still a student of sex. Because of puritanical thoughts of sex, she could not explore her own sexual pleasure before. Educators may help women by creating a safe atmosphere in which to share their sexual histories and current sexual experiences.

A spiritually mature woman will know how to protect and control her own body. Women have often been deprived of control over their bodies, and have often been sexually victimized by men. Some interviewees (E, F, I, R) talked about their difficulties in being able to control their bodies in relationship with men. One of them (F) said that

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<sup>16</sup> Harris, *Dance of the Spirit*, 17.



the most challenging experience with her faith journey was to exercise her power to control her body and sexuality in relationship with men. Some interviewees were sexually abused by boyfriends (D, L). More and more, women are beginning to recognize the connection between controlling their bodies and self-respect. Sexual violence transforms the victims' relationship to others, world, self, and God. At the same time, the social virtues associated with women--passivity, obedience, and patience--set women up to be perfect victims of sexual violence. Linda T. Sanford and Ann Fetter describe women's passive and powerless attitudes as "learned helplessness." They say that "learned helplessness" reinforces woman's generally poor sense of self, and especially her sense of not being able to control the situation of rape.<sup>17</sup> Women cannot prevent all situations of sexual violence; however, they can reduce the possibilities of sexual violence. Women need to trust their physical and spiritual power and to exercise that power to protect and control their own bodies.

Giving birth to a new life and raising and nurturing that life are meaningful spiritual experiences. Many women tell of pregnancy and birthing as the most important spiritual experience in their lives. Many interviewees (E, F, I, T, Q) described pregnancy and childbirth as a spiritual journey in which they experienced a new life inside them and they felt God's blessing and protection. One interviewee (T) said, "There was a real sense of fullness, completeness that was noticeable for me. And I liked being me." Another interviewee (I) said, "I felt like I was safe and everything would work out and God would protect the baby. . . . It's very strong, strong feeling." Biological motherhood can be a joyous experience, giving profound spiritual satisfaction and a sense of unity with all

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<sup>17</sup> Linda T. Sanford and Ann Fetter, *In Defense of Ourselves* (Yonder City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1979), 38.

other mothers, one that ultimately transcends ethnicity and class. Carol W. LaChance tells of her spiritual experience of carrying a child and giving birth. These experience allowed her to love and accept the sacredness of her body, and the life-giving strength and integrity of being a woman. It allowed her to claim responsibility for her body and her wisdom, and to treasure her communion with all living beings.<sup>18</sup>

While the womb symbolizes woman's creative power, it can also be seen as a destructive force. Christine Downing points out that a woman's womb can seem a prison for those whose lives are utterly constrained by it, or a place of hurt or sadness for those who have suffered miscarriages or abortions or hysterectomies.<sup>19</sup> Some women suffer from their infertility. According to Downing, the infertile woman loses not just her fantasies of having a child but may also lose her sense of having a "complete" female body.<sup>20</sup> This infertility constitutes a life crisis, and attendant marital conflict often occurs. With female infertility, the most common feelings are rage, loneliness, and depression. Infertile women need particular spiritual care and concern. Clergy and women in Christian community need to be prepared for the intensity of anger, sadness, or guilt that can accompany infertility, and actively affirm the woman beyond the issue of reproductive functioning.<sup>21</sup>

Pregnancy, birthing and nursing are not limited to the physical delivery of a baby.

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<sup>18</sup> Carol Wallas LaChance, The Way of the Mother (Rockport, Mass.: Element Books, 1991), 13.

<sup>19</sup> Downing, 105.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 109.

<sup>21</sup> Dean and Cullen, "Woman's Body: Spiritual Needs and Theological Presence," in Women in Travail and Transition, 92-93.

Rather, there are many forms of pregnancy, birthing and nursing. According to Maria Harris, “It is possible to be pregnant with a dream, to bring forth a book or a poem, to nurture new life in a friend or in a daughter at the brink of womanhood.”<sup>22</sup> These experiences teach that genuine spirituality is engaged with life. Women can give birth to new life for themselves and others through means other than childbirth. Women can give birth to creative ideas and visions from the depths of their own wisdom.

Spiritually mature women will learn how to overcome the tradition of oppressive maternal self-sacrifice and how to be mother for children and themselves. Many women are consumed by trying to balance work, family, child care, shopping, house cleaning, washing and all manner of other work. Sometimes, they feel that one body is not enough to exercise these multiple roles. Women are oftentimes exhausted, but they feel guilty when they want to rest and enjoy times of their own. Some interviewees (E, F, H) expressed their feelings of being overworked mothers who expended all their energy in taking care of children and keeping house. Young mothers (E, F) talked about their asexual relationships with their husbands because of many responsibilities in mothering. Women often take the roles of giving or self-sacrifice, rather than fostering their own self-esteem and sense of worth. Ursula King suggests that women need to ‘mother’ themselves, their interior life; they have to feed and nourish their thoughts, their dreams, their hopes, their prayers--the life of the spirit within them--so that they can be a source of giving and mothering to others.<sup>23</sup> Women need to learn to let their bodies rest, to be

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<sup>22</sup> Harris, *Dance of the Spirit*, 10.

<sup>23</sup> King, *Women and Spirituality*, 78.

restored and to generate new energy. They need an empowering space in their lives, which often means time and silence in order to pursue a deeper quest within themselves, to reflect on the sources and forces of their own lives and their own particular vocation.<sup>24</sup>

To find spiritual meaning in aging is not easy for many women. As women become older, they may be physically weaker and develop a chronic illness. Growing old also can be made difficult for women because of social standards of beauty they cannot meet. Many women have difficulty adjusting to the loss of beauty and youth as defined by society. Kathleen Fischer claims that spiritual growth for women in the later years means refusing to accept this equation of beauty with youth. Older women must believe in the beauty found in their mature lives, and in turn offer new images of aging to society.<sup>25</sup>

Menopause is a normal part of a woman's life cycle. Many women become depressed at this time and experience disturbing or even painful physical symptoms. One interviewee (P) talked about her mother's difficulty in going through menopause. She said that "her generation felt that [after menopause] she would no longer be beneficial to society. If you are not a child-bearer, what use are you. . . ." For the woman who has defined her life by its reproductive capacity, the natural life cycle event of menopause can be experienced negatively. Educators and pastoral counselors need to help women deal with the theological and self-identity issues that exist in the loss of their reproductive ability and its impact on their identity, marital and family relationships, and experience of creativity beyond reproduction.<sup>26</sup> Women need to help one another affirm new life

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 116.

<sup>25</sup> Kathleen R. Fischer, Winter Grace (New York: Paulist Press, 1985), 84-85.

<sup>26</sup> Dean and Cullen, 91.

experiences and move toward a new and creative life beyond the biological reproductive role.

To be aware of full embodiment in their spirituality and to affirm their bodily experiences in their spiritual journeys, women can engage in spiritual exercises and disciplines. Prayer and meditation are important spiritual disciplines that help women discern their embodied spirituality and acknowledge the sacredness and dignity of their bodily experiences. When women learn to meditate and pray through their bodies, “we energize our will to transform and be transformed within our rhythmic changes and seasons.”<sup>27</sup> Through silence, meditation, purification, and story sharing, women can experience their own cycles of life within the great mythic and natural cycles. Women may raise their own power by breathing, meditating, dancing, mourning, screaming, and singing.

Women’s rituals can also help women affirm and celebrate women’s bodies and bodily experiences as a source of creative and nurturing power. Women can express the questions of meaning raised by female-body experiences within a community context. Instead of the negative attitude toward the female body as sinful and as little more than a sexual symbol, women may celebrate the goodness, power, and holiness of the female body. Women today are creating new ceremonies that express women’s spiritual experiences. They are creating life cycle liturgies that “celebrate the holiness of women’s bodies and the goodness of women’s choices: menarche, reproductive choices,

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<sup>27</sup> Meinrad Craighead, “Immanent Mother,” in *The Feminist Mystic*, ed. Mary E. Giles (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1982), 78.

miscarriage, stillbirth, birthing, adoption, menopause, and death.”<sup>28</sup> In her book, Women-Church, Ruether suggests the creation and practice of new forms of ritual that sacramentalize women’s rites of passage that have been either ignored or relegated to the profane: the onset of menstruation, the break from parent’s home to autonomous life, marriage, divorce, coming out as a lesbian, embarking on new stages of life, menopause, sickness, and death.<sup>29</sup> Ruether also emphasizes a deeper liturgical dimension for healing from violence. She presents healing liturgies for women who have been raped or battered, and who have been the victim of childhood battering or sexual abuse.<sup>30</sup> Women can create their own liturgies and rituals to nourish their spirit, heal their wounds and celebrate the joy of the divine life within them. Kathleen Fischer also provides diverse prayers, reflections, meditations and rituals for diverse women’s transitions.<sup>31</sup> Women need to develop new rituals to affirm and celebrate their own embodied experiences.

To be spiritually mature, women need to cultivate body-affirming spirituality by discerning the sacredness of the female body, by finding spiritual meanings in their embodied experiences, and by celebrating their bodily experiences in their spiritual journeys.

### Embodied Images of God

The second aspect of a feminist vision of women’s embodied spiritual maturity is to

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<sup>28</sup> Diane Neu, “Celebration in a Different Key: Feminists Transform Liturgies,” Daughters of Sarah 16 (Nov.-Dec. 1990): 4.

<sup>29</sup> Ruether, Women-Church, 6.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 149-81.

<sup>31</sup> Fischer, Autumn Gospel.

have embodied images of God. Many interviewees experienced conflict between their own femaleness and the male image of God. Especially when interviewees had experienced pain in relationship with men such as a father, husband, pastor or sexual abuser, the male images of God were seriously challenged. One of them (R) said, "During the period I was going through divorce, I came closer to God. But then it became hard for me to pray to a male God." Another interviewee (C) said, "The pastor was having several affairs in the church with different women. He was a father figure. . . . God Father began to irritate me." As we have seen, feminist literature raises the same issue: that exclusively male images of God prevent women from valuing and affirming themselves as authentically made in the image of God. Patriarchal Christianity stresses that "as an inferior mix, woman can never as fully represent the image of God as man, who is seen as representing the rational and spiritual part of the self."<sup>32</sup> Spiritually mature women may recognize how male-dominant images of God alienate them from their bodily experiences and from God. They may even move in their spiritual journey toward a female image of deity, one who fully understands their bodily experiences, gives them wisdom to recognize the creative power of their bodies, and inspires a mature self-image. One interviewee (Q) said, "God being Mother, not in the sense of gender but more with the characteristics of mother. Someone who's nurturing. Someone who is gentle." Another interviewee (P) said, "I feel more empowered when I allow myself to read God as She to make it more holistic."

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<sup>32</sup> Ruether, Sexism and God-Talk, 94.

Many feminist psychologists and theologians agree that thinking about the gender of God has a notable influence on a sense of self.<sup>33</sup> The male images of God were largely created and sustained by men, who can never experience women's physiological experiences such as menstruation, pregnancy, childbirth, lactation, and menopause. To believe "God is father" makes a woman "aware of herself as a stranger, as an outsider, as an alienated person, not as a daughter who belongs or who is appointed to a marvelous destiny."<sup>34</sup> Monotheism in Judeo-Christian tradition is associated with maleness, creating and reinforcing a symbolic hierarchy of God-male-female. The hierarchy of God- male-female does not "merely make woman secondary in relation to God, it also gives her a negative identity in relation to the divine."<sup>35</sup>

Feminist theologians who realize the destructive function of the male God-images for women create new images for naming God. Mary Daly claims women's right to name the self, the world, and God by her methodology of "liberation-castration-exorcism" of language.<sup>36</sup> Carol Christ talks about the important function and effect of symbols on the human psyche and considers the effect of male symbolism of God on women. According to Christ, even though people reject an exclusively male symbolism of God on a conscious level, they may still cling to the symbolism of God the Father because "a

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<sup>33</sup> Mary Daly, Beyond God the Father (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973); Ruether, Sexism and God-Talk; Goldenberg, Changing of the Gods; Carol Ochs, Behind the Sex of God (Boston: Beacon Press, 1977); Anne Wilson Sachaef, Women's Reality (Minneapolis, Minn.: Winston Press, 1981); Mary Lou Randour, Women's Psyche, Women's Spirit (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987)

<sup>34</sup> Daly, Beyond God the Father, 20.

<sup>35</sup> Ruether, Sexism and God-Talk, 54.

<sup>36</sup> Daly, Beyond God the Father, 10.



symbol functions on levels of the psyche other than the rational.”<sup>37</sup> Because of this continuing effect of religious symbols on the human psyche, Christ suggests that “symbol systems cannot simply be rejected, they must be replaced.”<sup>38</sup>

These concerns have led many women to change linguistic symbols related to God. Sallie McFague, for example, criticizes the dualistic, anthropomorphic, and hierarchal characteristics of monarchical God-images. She suggests three alternative models of God as mother, lover, and friend. These models are not intended to be literalized, but they characterize God’s creating, caring, giving, unmotivated, unconditional, saving, healing, and sustaining activities.<sup>39</sup> According to McFague, this notion is a sharp challenge to the long anti-body, anti-physical, anti-matter tradition within Christianity.<sup>40</sup> God loves all bodily creatures. Neither God nor human beings are disembodied. The linguistic symbols of God as a Personal Being who is omnipotent, omniscience, transcendent, and immutable need to be changed to new linguistic symbols which can characterize the Divine’s creating, caring, healing, saving, reconciling, and sustaining activities.

Some spiritually mature women may find affirmation of the female body and power in the symbol of the Goddess. The importance of the Goddess for women is emphasized by many women who connect with ancient or newly discovered Goddess traditions.

According to Miriam Starhawk,

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<sup>37</sup> Carol P. Christ, “Why Women Need Goddess: Phenomenological, Psychological, and Political Reflections,” in *The Politics of Women’s Spirituality*, ed. Charlene Spretnak (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Books, 1982), 72.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 73.

<sup>39</sup> Sallie McFague, *Models of God* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), 97-180.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 74.

The image of the Goddess inspires women to see ourselves as divine, our bodies as sacred, the changing phases of our lives as holy, our aggression as healthy, our anger as purifying, and our power to nurture and create, but also to limit and destroy when necessary, as the very force that sustains all life. Through the Goddess, we can discover our strength, enlighten our minds, own our bodies, and celebrate our emotions.<sup>41</sup>

In a Goddess-centered religious tradition, women are encouraged to create their self-image in positive and life-affirming ways. Women may learn female power, the creativity of the female body, and trust in the female ability to create new ideas in relationship with a female deity. The birthing, nurturing, healing, and transformative qualities of ancient goddess myths are related to the cycles of womanhood. Carol Christ emphasizes that “the Goddess symbol for women is the affirmation of the female body and the life cycle expressed in it.”<sup>42</sup> In Goddess-centered religious traditions, the female body is not inferior or dangerous but rather is viewed “as the direct incarnation of waxing and waning, life and death cycles in the universe.”<sup>43</sup> The Goddess as mother is depicted giving birth, and giving birth is viewed as a symbol for all the creative, life giving powers of the universe. One interviewee (B) talked about the image of the birthing God. She said, “I like the image of the birthing God. . . . It’s God cooperating with this mother in birthing this creation.” We can, thus, experience the female deity in our bodily experience and in every earthly activity.

Positive experiences of the Goddess can especially influence the healing of female victims of abuse. Participants in ritual healing services for female victims have reported

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<sup>41</sup> Mirian Stahawk, “Witchcraft as Goddess Religion,” in *The Politics of Women’s Spirituality*, 51.

<sup>42</sup> Christ, 77.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 79.

that “the goddess was meaningful both as a symbol of female divinity and as an image of female strength and power.”<sup>44</sup> Through that experience, women who met the Goddess as an integral part of themselves had an improved and healthier self-image. The symbol of the Goddess contributed to “a redefinition of self as powerful actor rather than helpless victim.”<sup>45</sup> However, like God who has an exclusive male image, goddesses in ancient religious tradition also have negative and destructive characteristics. For instance, in the Greek Goddess tradition, goddesses have psychological difficulties such as emotional distance, the lack of empathy, ruthlessness, jealousy, depression, promiscuity, and withdrawal into unreality.<sup>46</sup> When women turn to female images of Goddess, they should critically and carefully reflect on those ancient religious traditions as they do with other traditions.

In Christian tradition, women may also find the feminine image or aspect of God. Sophia, the biblical figure of Wisdom is “a powerful feminine image of God’s activity in creation, in redemption and in the blessed community.”<sup>47</sup> In the Hebrew Scriptures, Sophia is “not only present at the creation, but herself the creatrix of the world; she holds sovereignty over all nations, but her favored dwelling-place is in Israel, in the Temple at

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<sup>44</sup> Jacobs, 267.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 278.

<sup>46</sup> Jean Shinoda Bolen, *Goddesses in Everywoman* (New York: Harper & Row, 1984), 302.

<sup>47</sup> Barbara Newman, “Some Medieval Theologians and the Sophia Tradition,” *Downside Review* 108 (April 1990): 111.

Jerusalem.”<sup>48</sup> She is also characterized by images of fertility, such as fragrant spices, rivers and the tree of life, and she proffers an alluring invitation.<sup>49</sup>

The process of rejecting old images of God and of searching for new images and symbols of female deity is a difficult and fearful process. When women begin to be aware of female images of God by a special experience, by other sisters' influence, or by feminist theory, women may feel emotions that are exciting, frightening, or embarrassing because they have been socialized into patriarchal religious traditions for a long time. One interviewee (B) talked about her freedom from all of the guilt of her Southern Baptist background when she imaged God as Mother. She said, “I thought, ‘Yes, God can be a Mother.’ All the guilt of the Southern Baptist Fundamentalism got stripped away.” Naomi R. Goldenberg observes that a decrease in dependence on one's father, or a loss of one's father through physical death, seems to go hand in hand with an increase in a woman's awareness of her own needs and feelings.<sup>50</sup> The death of God the Father and the breaking of male images of God in women's psyche can become the onset of the awareness of female deity and of a woman's own dignity. However, this process may not be easy or peaceful. Some women may experience spiritual darkness because of their increasing inability to relate to the traditional symbols and their loss of familiar symbols and images. They may in fact have a painful time. Through the painful process of transforming images and symbols of God, women can develop new images of a God who nurtures and who is immanent in their embodied spirituality.

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 113.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 113.

<sup>50</sup> Goldenberg, *Changing of the Gods*, 39-40.

Women may experience strong anger or rage at male-dominant images of God when they recognize how Christian tradition has distorted female deity and negatively influenced women's self-esteem and body experiences. Women may use their anger as power to recreate and recover new images of God and to transform the negative feeling of their body experience. To integrate new images of God into their spiritual lives, Kathleen Fischer proposes "not only talking about new metaphors, but praying to God under these new names, seeing self and world through these images, and incorporating them into our litanies and rituals."<sup>51</sup> Women need to interact with new images and symbols and to develop relationships with God through those new images and symbols.

Women's embodied images of God are continuously transformed through women's life experiences including new bodily experiences. Ana-Maria Rizzuto says that the psychic process of creating and finding God as personalized, representational, transitional object never ceases in the course of human life. It is a developmental process that covers the entire life cycle from birth to death.<sup>52</sup> She insists that God as a transitional representation needs to be recreated in each developmental crisis if it is to be found relevant for lasting belief. The developmental process of forming a God representation is exceedingly complex and is influenced by a multitude of cultural, social, familial, and individual phenomena, ranging from the deepest biological levels of human experience to the subtlest of spiritual realizations.<sup>53</sup> Women's consciousness is always moving and changing and so their experiences of the divine are also always moving and changing.

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<sup>51</sup> Fischer, Women at the Well, 65.

<sup>52</sup> Ana-Maria Rizzuto, The Birth of the Living God (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 179.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 182.

As spiritual companions, women need to support one another's efforts to explore more fully their images of God and to search for new images of God through their relationship with the divine. One interviewee (B) learned diverse images of God in a women's group. Through the influence of other women, she began to image God as Mother. Kathleen Fischer gives important advice to educators and spiritual directors. She suggests that "a spiritual guide's role is not to promote any one image of God, but rather to support a woman's process of understanding how she images the divine and how her images affect her life."<sup>54</sup> Women need to go toward inner exploration to discover their humanity, their wholeness, and their holiness.

Through the long journey of searching for female imagery, women have begun critically to reflect upon the exclusively male images of God which negatively and destructively influence women's self-image and the understanding of the female body. The female images, symbols and myths of God, which our foremothers created, experienced, and imitated, give us a rich heritage for female images of God. Women's new experiences of God positively influence their self-esteem, self-confidence, and the recognition of a powerful and creative female body as the image of God. In relationship with a female deity, women may develop a healthy and mature self-image of womanhood by believing in themselves and loving themselves as women in and through the many phases and experiences of their embodied lives.

### Embodied Relationship with Other Human Beings

The third aspect of a feminist vision of women's embodied spiritual maturity is embodied relationships with other human beings--relationships built on equality and

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<sup>54</sup> Fischer, Women at the Well, 59.

partnership, moving toward a new social order. When women recognize their sacred selves, they also need to realize the sacredness of other human beings. Women's spiritual maturity is not limited to consciousness of their own personal bodies but extends to all embodied reality. Fischer suggests a feminist vision of life, "emphasizing inclusion rather than exclusion, connectedness rather than separateness, and mutuality in relationships rather than dominance and submission."<sup>55</sup>

For spiritually mature women, mutuality and interdependence are important values in human relationship. Feminist psychologists such as Carol Gilligan, Jean Baker Miller, and Nancy Chodorow argue that interdependence and mutuality are central to women's self-identity and moral development. While men often know themselves through separation and independence, women often know themselves through attachment and connection. Many interviewees (A, F, O, R, S) think of themselves as peacemakers in their family and care about their family throughout their life times. Gilligan asserts that women's identity is usually defined in a context of relationships and judged by a standard of responsibility and care. The development of an ethics of care reflects a cumulative knowledge of human relationships, and evolves around a central insight, that self and other are interdependent.<sup>56</sup> Jean Baker Miller also insists that women's sense of self usually develops in relation to affiliations and relationships. For women, interconnection is a natural way of being and acting. At adolescence, the girl is seeking to fulfill her great

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>56</sup> Gilligan, In a Different Voice, 74.

desire of “being-in-relationship.” Being-in-relationship means developing all of one’s self in complex relationships.<sup>57</sup>

Nancy Chodorow finds that the pivotal point of difference between men and women’s identity is mothering. For her, growing girls experience themselves as continuous with others, and their experience of self contains more flexible or permeable ego boundaries derived from the retention of preoedipal attachments to their mother. Feminine personality comes to include a fundamental definition of self in relationship.<sup>58</sup> Women’s understanding of self and other is specified by the inclusion of principles of mutuality and interdependence. The principle of mutuality and interdependence is based on a view of human persons as embodied subjects, essentially relational as well as autonomous. The value of human beings lies “not only in their freedom but also in their capacity to know and be known, to love and be loved; as beings whose destiny is communion.”<sup>59</sup>

In light of a new understanding of human relationship, traditional ideals of spiritual perfection must be changed. In traditional ideals of faith development, nurturing, receptivity, emotion, imagination, and relationality have been minimized or excluded from qualities of spiritual growth. Women need to restore the importance of these qualities and integrate them in their lives. Women’s feelings of accepting self and others, and experiencing oneness with others and with God, are essential to understanding

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<sup>57</sup> Jean Baker Miller, “The Development of Women’s Sense of Self,” in *Women’s Growth in Connection*, eds. Judith V. Jordan, Alexandra G. Kaplan, Jean B. Miller, Irene P. Stiver, and Janet L. Surrey (New York: Guilford Press, 1991), 21.

<sup>58</sup> Nancy Chodorow, *The Reproduction of Mothering* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), 169.

<sup>59</sup> Margaret A. Farley, “Feminist Consciousness and the Interpretation of Scripture,” in *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible*, ed. Letty M. Russell (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1985), 44-47.



women's spirituality. Maria Harris mentions the power of care. Caring not only affects the people cared for, but also gives power and strength to the one who gives care. Care givers learn human relations through their caring. They learn that "each of human lives is an interplay of life and death, succeeding and failing, growing and declining."<sup>60</sup>

In this patriarchal society, however, many women suffer from unhealthy and destructive relationships. For example, mutuality in male-female relationships is often difficult to establish, even though both partners deeply long for it; the relationships are often laden with stereotyped expectations, particularly around dominance and submission.<sup>61</sup> Also, the Christian virtue of self-sacrifice has been imposed upon women more strongly than upon men, contributing to the oppression of women. A basic dilemma for women in families is the tension that is created as they attempt to fulfill their own needs while effectively meeting the needs of those for whom they care. Women have been socialized into serving the needs of others and sacrificing their own interests in the name of Christian virtue and love. Women need to realize how self-sacrificial love and selfless devotion to others as imposed by Christianity reinforces women's inequality. They need to develop a relational love that "is continually seeking to create, deepen, and extend the bonds that unite self and others in more inclusive relationships."<sup>62</sup>

The worldwide practice and acceptance of violence against women is a problem of overwhelming magnitude. Domestic violence is caused by a relationship of unequal

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<sup>60</sup> Harris, *Dance of the Spirit*, 39.

<sup>61</sup> Judith V. Jordan, "Meaning of Mutuality," in *Women's Growth in Connection*, 89.

<sup>62</sup> Linell E. Cady "Relational Love: Feminist Christian Vision," in *Embodied Love*, eds. Paula M. Cooley, Sharon A. Farmer, and Mary Ellen Ross (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987), 143.

power. Battered women suffer physically and mentally. Women who have suffered violence to their bodies at the hands of someone whom they trusted, know the humiliation and fear that become connected with one's violated body. Christian norms of virtue in relation to the family keep many battered women in violent families by expecting them to sacrifice their personal safety. According to Susan B. Thistlethwaite's work with abused women, women with a strong religious background have the greatest difficulty in accepting that the violence against them is wrong; they have been taught that resistance to injustice is unbiblical and unchristian and that women are inferior to their husbands.<sup>63</sup> Battered women need to move away from passive acceptance of the violence, and to ask questions about the suffering they have endured. Through her relationships with battered women, Laureen E. Smith observes, "As battered women realize that God is found in their survival, beliefs shift from accepting the violence as a part of life, to realizing different ways of living."<sup>64</sup> Women can then feel affirmed in leaving a violent relationship and in selecting a "family of choice." A "family of choice" can be simply the woman and her children, or it can be the support systems of religious groups, shelter-based friends, or the wider community. "Families of choice" are grounded in love, care and non-violence.<sup>65</sup> In support groups, women begin to understand that the journey from victim to survivor includes a slow, excruciating process of coming to affirm and love

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<sup>63</sup> Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite, "Every Two Minutes: Battered Women and Feminist Interpretation," in Weaving the Visions, eds. Judith Plaskow and Carol P. Christ (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1989), 305.

<sup>64</sup> Laureen E. Smith, "We Are Where God Is: Sacred Dimensions of Battered Women's Lives" in Sacred Dimensions of Women's Experience, 212.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 215.

one's own body. The process of doing this is sacred work; women reclaim their bodies for health rather than victimization, for creativity rather than destruction, for life.<sup>66</sup>

As discussed in an earlier chapter, the patriarchal understanding of women's sexuality has influenced women's relationships with others in destructive ways. Pornography, sexual harassment, domestic violence, sexual assault and rape, sexual abuse of children, sexual abuse of parishioners by clergy, and ritual abuse, all exist within a social mythology of denial and hatred of the female body, nature, and mortality.<sup>67</sup> Patriarchal culture does not cultivate mutually empowering relationships; rather it promotes destructive relationships and makes women the object of male sexual desire. Carter Heyward presents an alternative possibility. She argues that "to be sexually faithful is to experience and express ourselves relationally in such a way that both we and others are empowered, and empowering, as co-creators, liberators, and bearers of blessing to one another and to the world."<sup>68</sup> She emphasizes women's capacity to be genuinely intimate with one another, to evoke creativity from one another, to be deeply touched, and to touch others deeply. To be spiritually mature, women need to nurture and empower themselves and their partners in order to actualize their authentic sexuality and to sustain relationships of mutuality.

For adult women, mothering is one of the most crucial and complex relationships with others. Women's reproductive labor and mothering have redemptive and life-giving dimensions. A mother's love may be one of the greatest sources of spiritual and moral

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 217.

<sup>67</sup> Pamela Cooper-White, *The Cry of Tamar* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 60.

<sup>68</sup> Heyward, *Our Passion for Justice*, 192.

insights. Many interviewees who are mothers described mothering as a spiritual and joyful experience. One interviewee (Q) said, “I can see the Holy Spirit through the children, the way they make me feel, the things that they say. . . . Having small children, it’s important for me to know who I am spiritually so that I can be a guide for them, too.” Another interviewee (I) said, “they are innocent and they need you and you need them. . . . They keep you focused on what’s good in life and you thank God for every moment you have with them.”

At the same time, people have romanticized motherhood by creating a fantasy of “the perfect mother.” Social ideals of motherly self-sacrifice force mothers to perform an enormous amount of indispensable caring labor. Hilda Scott asserts that what all women have in common is that they share most of the unpaid work of the world. The vast majority of women, whether mothers or not, are poor in the absolute sense, carrying out an enormous amount of indispensable work without any remuneration.<sup>69</sup> In the interviews, young mothers (E, F) described their ambivalent feelings of mothering caused by their hard work. Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore insists that “only by loving herself can the mother fully love her child.”<sup>70</sup> To be spiritually mature, women need to love and care for themselves as much as they love and care for their children. Without loving and caring for themselves, mothers can be physically exhausted and spiritually devastated.

The mother-daughter relationship is very important for many women. A mother’s attitude toward her own body and sexuality is crucial to the way a daughter thinks of

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<sup>69</sup> Hilda Scott, *Working Your Way to the Bottom* (London: Pandora Press, 1984), x, 3.

<sup>70</sup> Miller-McLemore, 123.

herself. The heritage of viewing the female cycles of menstruation, birth, and menopause as negative is passed on from mother to daughter. Some interviewees (B, E, G, O) complained about their mother's insensitivity to help them have positive attitudes about their bodily experiences. One of them (G) said, "My mother never fully explained to me what would happen when I got my period. . . . She didn't take time to explain what was happening or make me feel proud that I am a woman now." In this patriarchal society, mother and daughter need to empower each other to make themselves the subjects of their own embodied lives and stories. An experienced mother may act as a guide and counselor to her daughter at critical moments. Spiritually mature women may reclaim the spiritual heritage from their foremothers. Kathleen Fischer reflects, "We are linked not only physically, but spiritually as well, to our mothers, our grandmothers, and all the women who have come before us. With them we share a common gender identity and the social roles and expectations that go with it."<sup>71</sup>

To be spiritually mature, women may cultivate embodied relationships, which are non-competitive and non-dominating. Spiritually mature women no longer ask: "Should I love myself or others? Rather, the assumption is that I cannot love one well without loving the other."<sup>72</sup> Without their sense of themselves as sisters, women cannot empower each other's spirituality or transform broken relationships in this patriarchal society. The spiritual conviction that all women are sisters, despite different races, religions, classes, and sexualities, does not deny each woman's uniqueness or the unequal power

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<sup>71</sup> Fischer, Women at the Well, 196.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 119.

relationships that exist among women themselves. Cultural sensitivity is essential for relationships among women of different ethnic groups. Women need to learn and respect differences in culture and community. Spiritually mature women can help one another maintain harmony and cultural consistency with the values, beliefs, teachings, and practices of their particular racial and ethnic group.

To be spiritually mature in embodied relationship with other human beings, women need to recognize the sacredness of other human beings, constantly to create and sustain mutual and equal relationships among themselves, and to build communities of communion and companionship rather than of competition and separation.

#### An Interdependent Relationship with the World as “God’s Body”

The fourth aspect of a feminist vision of women’s spiritual maturity is to have an interdependent relationship with the world as “God’s Body.” This vision means to be aware of the world as “God’s body” and to cultivate an earth-based spirituality through the realization of the interdependence of all nature. Even though most interviewees did not mention embodied relationship with the earth, it is a major theme in feminist literature. Women’s bodies are a part of the earth, and woman’s bodily experiences are grounded on the earth.

Sallie McFague’s metaphor of “the world as God’s body” provides a unified and interdependent understanding of God-human-world relationships and emphasizes human responsibility for the fate of the earth.<sup>73</sup> For McFague, we know God through the divine incarnation in nature. God is not purely external, but is the source and power that

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<sup>73</sup> McFague, Body of God.

enlivens the entire process and its material forms. McFague says, “Divine immanence is empowerment toward the liberation, well-being, and fulfillment of all the bodies within God’s body.”<sup>74</sup> God moves in creation giving breath to all bodies. For McFague, the world as God’s body must be carefully tended, nurtured, protected, guided, loved, and befriended, both as valuable in itself and as necessary to the continuation of life.<sup>75</sup> The earth is no longer an object to be conquered by human beings. McFague’s metaphor of the world as God’s body offers new possibilities for reflection upon the relationship between humanity and other living creatures.

An environmental crisis is evident to all who look. All are faced with worldwide deforestation, food shortages, increasing pollution, disappearance of species, and new dreadful diseases. Women who create new life and care for all living beings often face the environmental crisis with a worry about its impact upon their capacity to bear healthy children. Women worry about children being born with environmentally caused problems. They also see “perfectly healthy children” disabled or destroyed by contamination in their homes and communities.<sup>76</sup> The intuition of interconnection in women’s experience deconstructs the pyramid of hierarchical dualism and reconstructs a mutual and interconnected understanding of humanity vis-a-vis nature.

Ecofeminists particularly recognize relationships between the oppression of women and the devastation of earth. They assert that the ecological crisis is related to Western

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 192.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 77.

<sup>76</sup> Lin Nelson, “The Place of Women in Polluted Places,” in *Reweaving the World*, eds. Irene Diamond and Gloria F. Orenstein (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1990), 177-79.

philosophy, which supports the systematic denigration of women, animals and the earth itself. A hierarchal worldview has proclaimed human control over nature, and this has led to the exploitation of natural and animal resources. Women have long been associated with nature. The physical rape of women by men is easily paralleled by its rapacious attitude toward the Earth itself.<sup>77</sup> According to Yaakov J. Garb, the powerful connection between violence toward nature and violence toward women stems from an unconscious horror of physical immanence and dependency, a fear of being swallowed up by the immanence of the female body and by the world of matter in general.<sup>78</sup> Elizabeth A. Johnson explains the relationship between women and earth in the Western dualistic tradition. She criticizes the male principle that men are linked with a transcendent, spiritual principle beyond nature, while women and the earth embody the lower, material principle.<sup>79</sup> Johnson believes that the exploitation of women and earth has a common ideological root. In addition, the hierarchy of mind over body has political consequences and translates into social structures of domination. Under patriarchy, women are identified literally and symbolically with the natural world. Both are mutually associated and mutually devalued.<sup>80</sup>

Ecofeminists advocate earth-based spirituality. They insist that we must stop the destruction of the Earth and heal the Earth. The Earth itself embodies spirit and the

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<sup>77</sup> Arisika Razak, "Toward a Womanist Analysis of Birth," in Reweaving the World, 165.

<sup>78</sup> Yaakov J. Garb, "Perspective or Escape? Ecofeminist Musings on Contemporary Earth Imagery," in Reweaving the World, 273.

<sup>79</sup> Elizabeth A. Johnson, Women, Earth, and Creator Spirit (New York: Paulist Press, 1993), 12.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 12-15.



cosmos is alive; everything in nature is interconnected. Earth-based spirituality calls us to live with integrity. We are part of a living eco-body; this world is the terrain where we live our spiritual growth and development.<sup>81</sup> Even though ecofeminism is not a homogeneous set of strategies and solutions, ecofeminists share common ideas. They try to consciously create new cultures that would embrace and honor the values of caretaking and nurturing. They affirm and celebrate the embeddedness of all Earth's people in the multiple webs and cycles of life. Ecofeminism seeks to reweave new stories that acknowledge and value the biological and cultural diversity that sustains all life.<sup>82</sup>

To be spiritually mature, women need to create and embrace a new theology of nature and to rethink the whole idea of "earth." Women need to know that the Earth does not belong to us, but human beings belong to Earth. Johnson claims that humanity must recognize its "kinship with earth." A kinship model teaches that the natural world has given birth to all living things and sustains all nature, including humanity; it is the matrix of human origin, growth, and fulfillment.<sup>83</sup> Through the experience of nurturing, women become more attentive to caring for the earth. They often see the world from the perspective of interconnected parts of equal value. The perspectives of ecofeminism and deep ecology help people see their embeddedness in nature, overcoming a sense of alienation from the rest of creation. Eleanor Rae insists that women recognize

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<sup>81</sup> Stahawk, "Power, Authority, and Mystery: Ecofeminism and Earth-Based Spirituality," in Reweaving the World, 73.

<sup>82</sup> Diamond and Orenstein, xi.

<sup>83</sup> Elizabeth Johnson, 30-31.

themselves as part of nature because of their biological properties, as evident in menstruation, pregnancy, birthing, and nurturance.<sup>84</sup>

Spiritually mature women begin to transform the transcendent images of God separated from the earth. Feminists insist that God should be understood in terms of mutual connection with the earth. Johnson points out that the Spirit has been neglected in Christian community. For her, Creator Spirit is the Lifegiver who is intimately related to the earth. The Spirit is the creative origin of all life; the Spirit is the unceasing, dynamic flow of divine power, which sustains the universe, bringing forth life. All creatures are connected to one another and the whole of creation through the indwelling, renewing, moving Creator Spirit.<sup>85</sup>

Many women in the West today are inspired by the myths and symbols of ancient Goddess cultures in which creation was imaged as female and the Earth was revered as sacred. Asian culture has a rich and ancient goddess tradition. Goddesses are providential beings and creators of the world and human beings. However, these goddess cultures were destroyed by the growth of Buddhism, Confucianism, and Christianity. Female images of God were replaced by male dominant images of God.<sup>86</sup> Female images of deity must be recovered, however; a powerful female image is usually earth-related. Ecofeminists insist that with the shift from matricentric to the patrocentric and patriarchal

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<sup>84</sup> Eleanor Rae, Women, the Earth, the Divine (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1994), 29.

<sup>85</sup> Elizabeth Johnson, 42-43.

<sup>86</sup> See Naomi P. F. Southard, "Recovery and Rediscovered Images: Spiritual Resources for Asian American Women," Asian Journal of Theology 3 (1989): 629; Jordan Paper, "The Persistence of Female Deities in Patriarchal China," Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion 6 (Spring 1990): 31-33; Man Ja Choi, "The Liberating Function of Feminine Images of God in Traditional Korean Religion," Ching Feng 35 (March 1992): 22-43.

world-view, worship came to be focused no longer on the giver of life, death, and regeneration but on the sky gods who had control over nature. Mary Daly documents the manifestations of ‘Goddess murder’ where the destruction of female life-powers is continually re-enacted in the raping and killing of women and nature.<sup>87</sup> The ecofeminist arts often invoke the symbol of the Great Mother in order to emphasize the interconnectedness of the three levels of creation, all imaged as female outside of patriarchy: Cosmic creation, procreation, and artistic creation.<sup>88</sup> The image of the Great Mother heals the divisions between the material and the spiritual, the human and the nonhuman, the mind and the body, and the sacred and the profane.

To be spiritually mature, women need to challenge patriarchy and, also, the anthropocentrism in their culture and church. Western Christian religious belief overemphasizes human uniqueness over the rest of creation; it usually views human history as the near-exclusive domain of divine activity. Many religious textbooks emphasize the uniqueness of human beings and their specific role in the world. Much of traditional church teaching has been rooted and remains in a dualistic approach and in anthropocentrism. Animals, plants, and the entire living creation have often been viewed as mere lifeless matter for human use. Lacking the obvious concern for the whole of creation, the prevailing norm is that non-human life can be neglected. Educators need to teach that all humans, both male and female, are created by God within a set of divinely instituted relationships. It is a fragile web. Women need to learn a true honoring of unity

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<sup>87</sup> Mary Daly, *Gyn/Ecology* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1978), 107-12.

<sup>88</sup> Gloria F. Orenstein, “Artists as Healers: Envisioning Life-Giving Culture,” in *Reweaving the World*, 281.

and diversity in all of the creation. Nature and culture should be viewed, not in a dualistic fashion, but as components in a dynamically interactive system. Each being or life form has its own intrinsic beauty and value. Every area of the religious curriculum ought be examined for its attitudes toward the earth.

Religious ritual may help women experience their deepest feelings of spirituality infused with ecological wisdom. Women's rituals can be closely connected with nature because "our female existence is connected to the metamorphoses of nature: the pure potential of water, the transformative power of blood, the seasonal rhythms of the earth, and the cycles of lunar dark and light."<sup>89</sup> The earth is the body of our grandmothers and mothers. Religious symbols such as bread, water, oil, wine, salt can acquire new meanings in re-created religious rituals. Relating the environment to religious experience, ritual, and spiritual practice can help to establish an ethical foundation for real spiritual identity. In contemplation, women can see the presence of the divine in nature and recognize that the earth is sacred place. Through contemplation, the religious spirit grows in the realization of how deeply humanity is embedded in the earth.<sup>90</sup>

Spiritually mature women's vision of mother-earth is that all living things are bound up together in one interdependent web without any boundaries. Their voices speak for peace, nonviolence and respect for nature. Women can learn the values of caring for and nurturing each other and the environment by paying attention to immediate human needs and feelings. Women's values of caring in daily life must be revalued and practiced in

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<sup>89</sup> Craighead, 79.

<sup>90</sup> Elizabeth Johnson, 63.

relation to the earth. Women need to support life in everything they do and to reject any products or processes that degrade life or creation in any way. To live a spiritually mature life, women constantly need to bring their lives into harmony with the natural cycles and systems that sustain life.

### Involvement in the Church as the “Body of Christ”

The fifth aspect of a feminist vision of women’s embodied spiritual growth is to get involved as active members in the church as the “Body of God.” Many interviewees experienced spiritual frustration and alienation in patriarchal Christian community. One interviewee (B) described the negative teaching of woman in Christian community. She said, “I have been fed in church that we are Eve, we are the temptress, we seduced Adam, we are bad, we are evil. . . . It was very male oriented.” Spiritually mature women challenge patriarchal Christian tradition and church structures that disempower women’s embodied spiritual growth. They have a vision of Christian community in which women can nurture and empower their spiritual growth as embodied members of the church as the Body of Christ.

Paul presents the Christian community as the “Body of Christ”(1Cor. 12:27). In 1 Corinthians 12, Paul talks about the diversity of gifts in the Christian community. The metaphor of the body is used to convey an organic view of human life in community. Just as in the human body, each part or member contributes to an organic whole; the same is true for Christians, who are organic members of the whole.<sup>91</sup> Fischer claims that one of the best ways to love any member of the Christian community is to receive that persons’

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<sup>91</sup> Fischer, Winter Grace, 54-55.

gifts.<sup>92</sup> Christian community has not received women's gifts and has often suppressed women's gifts. Patriarchal Christianity has not cultivated the diverse gifts of women, but rather has repressed women's talents and spirituality in the church.

Spiritually mature women often challenge external and internal aspects of patriarchal Christianity. They often challenge exclusive male language, androcentric images and symbols in Christianity. One interviewee (R) said, "Going to church is the biggest challenge because the language is so sexist. Especially in a Catholic mass, we use a lot of male language." They also challenge women's limited participation and invisible roles in church activities. One interviewee (M) said, "My church was very conservative. It didn't allow women to teach men, they could teach children and maybe youth but women were not allowed to be leaders in the church." Another interviewee (P) said, "Women would wash the church, sweep the church, make bread and feed the priest and monks. It seemed very, very oppressive." All of these women raise challenging and disturbing questions about women's status and roles in the patriarchal church. Even though women have always been deeply involved with religious beliefs and practices, they do hold important invisible positions in the church but not formal and recognized leadership positions in the church. Women have been virtually excluded from participation in the church's internal and external policy-making and leadership. The exclusion of women from leadership positions is related to women's bodily experiences.

Much exclusion of women from sacred things and ritual acts is related to menstruation and childbearing. According to Ruether, priestly traditions define women's uncleanness and see female bodiliness as polluting and defiling the sacred. Women must be distanced

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<sup>92</sup> Ibid., 58.

from the Holy, and Holiness becomes a male mystery.<sup>93</sup> Ruether insists that, historically, women participated decisively in the spread of early Christianity and also played important leadership roles as local ministers, traveling evangelists, and patrons who lent their houses for the Christian assemblies.<sup>94</sup> However, the Christian church adapted to historical, political existence and accepted patriarchal norms of church organization and lost the earlier vision of a new community based on equal relationship.<sup>95</sup>

Women often experience their churches as oppressive structures on two levels. The first level is marked by the structure of male hierarchy and its authority commanding obedience to a set of rules and prohibitions. The second level of alienation is caused by interaction between women and clergy, including the insensitivity of the clergy and their off-putting behavior in the patriarchal system.<sup>96</sup> When women recognize the ideological function of religion, they can work to change it. Ruether claims that women in contemporary churches suffer from “linguistic deprivation” and “eucharistic famine.” They can no longer nurture their souls amidst alienating words that ignore or deny their existence, and they desperately need communities that nurture their journey into wholeness.<sup>97</sup> Spiritually mature women can call into question the concepts, images, and symbols embedded in Christian language and thought.

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<sup>93</sup> Ruether, Sexism and God-Talk, 195.

<sup>94</sup> Ruether, Women-Church, 45.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>96</sup> Dorothea McEwan, ed. Women Experiencing Church (Leominster, England: Gracewing, 1991), 248-49.

<sup>97</sup> Ruether, Women-Church, 4-5.

To be fully alive and embodied members of the church, women need to create and practice new understandings of communion and ministry. They may transform hierarchically ordered castes of clergy and laity and a male-dominated priesthood, and construct the community of mutual empowerment. Sandra M. Schneiders argues that women's exclusion from ordained ministry negatively affects their self-understandings as Christians. For Schneiders, women early in life develop a sense of sacral unworthiness and total sacramental dependence on men.<sup>98</sup> Women need more female pastors, spiritual directors, and educators who fully understand their embodied experiences and people's spiritual needs and have experienced a call to the vocation of the priesthood. However, many women actually mistrust women in ministerial situations and prefer to work for men because of their socialization into private and male-dependent roles in the church. Such women often attribute to themselves and to other women as well the stereotypical traits of flightiness, lack of confidence, poor judgment, sentimentality, and lack of intelligence.<sup>99</sup>

In the community of mutual empowerment, women need to empower their talents and to activate their skills and gifts as ministries. Full community life needs a variety of enablers. Community members are invited to participate in the areas of liturgy, education, and theological reflection, organizing its own material and human resources, committing itself to some social praxis, and deepening its inner life according to their own gifts.<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> Sandra M. Schneiders, "The Effects of Women's Experience on Their Spirituality," in Women's Spirituality, 33-34.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

<sup>100</sup> Rosemary R. Ruether suggests that a congregation needs at a minimum liturgical creators, teachers, administrators, community organizers, and spiritual counselors. Ruether, Women-Church, 89.



As embodied members of the church, women need to help one another to recognize and cultivate their own gifts and vocations for ministry. Women can suggest a new vision of church community that is nonhierarchical, nonauthoritarian, shared responsibility, empowerment, and mutuality.

Many women in contemporary patriarchal churches find it difficult to nurture their embodied spiritual growth; thus, they try to transform patriarchal church beliefs, exclusive male language and symbols, and male-dominant leadership. As part of the Body of Christ, each woman needs to accept her responsibility to build a church community in which women can fully and freely nurture and empower their embodied spirituality.

### Embodied Participation in Social Transformation

The sixth aspect of a feminist vision of women's spiritual maturity is embodied participation in social transformation. This vision means to challenge patriarchal social structures that hinder women's embodied spiritual growth, and to participate in social transformation. Many interviewees talked about the problems of sexist, racist, and heterosexist society. Minority women, especially, emphasized the necessity of social transformation. One interviewee (H) said, "you have to learn about others before you can say 'I don't like them.' God didn't make us to do that. Society is losing out." Women often know and accept their roles and responsibility in this broken world and their power for transforming the world. One interviewee (N) said, "My struggle had been, and still is, directed towards our society that through sexism and heterosexism and various forms of classism and racism works to take away that connection or to deny that connection of the

sacredness of the spiritual connection to the body.” Women cannot expect to find their spiritual wholeness in an unequal and unjust society.

The vision of a new world, in which women fully nurture and empower their embodied spirituality, will only be realized by concrete efforts of many individuals and groups. Carter Heyward defines faith as “our commitment to participate, with and by the power of God, in the ongoing creation, liberation, and blessing of the world.”<sup>101</sup> Spiritual maturing is a liberating process that moves toward freedom and wholeness and challenges the social structures that impede it. At the Fourth UN World Conference on Women in China, women discussed twelve critical areas of women’s struggle worldwide for equality: poverty, education, health, violence against women, effects of armed conflict, economic structures and policies, inequality of men and women in decision making, gender equality, women’s rights, media, environment, and girl child.<sup>102</sup> Women suffer bodily, economically, politically, and mentally within a larger society that excludes women from positions of authority and subordinates the lives of women to the control and domination of men.

Women’s embodied social participation is based on women’s daily lives in connection with the world. Many interviewees described their spiritual journeys as an everyday struggle. One interviewee (O) said, “Life is constant struggle and perseverance is what matters in every struggle and every success.” Another interviewee (P) said, “Everyday there is another obstacle and another awareness of who I am as a woman, and how that

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<sup>101</sup> Heyward, *Our Passion for Justice*, 190.

<sup>102</sup> Peggy Andrews, *Sisters Listening to Sisters* (Westport, Conn.: Bergin & Garvey, 1996), 153-54.

relates to my spirituality.” Many women participate in the daily creating, nurturing, and transforming process, but these women’s lives are often devalued in patriarchal society. In many cases, women’s work is invisible work, such as caring for child and older adult dependents and giving birth to the next generation. One interviewee (Q) said, “Every day I struggle to get in touch with the spiritual. What is most important is loving one another, reaching out, helping others.” This woman affirmed that participating in the transformative creating, caring and changing process in daily life is valuable and essential to the life of society. At the same time, it takes a lot of energy to struggle from day to day. In their daily lives, when women become aware of shared problems, they can commit to social change. Women’s social participation is a spiritual struggle, not divorced from daily life, but rooted in the concrete material, economic, political and social conditions of women’s complex experience. Through their daily struggle, women can learn how to resist the constant negative messages from patriarchal society. They can reject and resist social structures that suppress the fullness of their bodies.

As an embodied being, each woman has her own concrete social, racial, cultural, and sexual context. Each woman experiences sexism, racism, classism, and heterosexism in different forms and in different interactive patterns. Some women are committed activists, devoting their energy to political and social campaigns or movements focused on the numerous issues of urgent concern to women. Some women give their energy to the nurture and care of people around them and change life-values and life-styles of themselves and others. By naming the sources of suffering for each woman and by struggling against injustice, oppression, and discrimination in patriarchal society, women

can build solidarity with other women and a spiritual community that is based on connectedness.

To participate in social transformation, women need to listen to the diverse voices of women of many racial and ethnic groups. Women of color in a racist and patriarchal social system are a double minority. Skin color is an important determinant in life experiences in the United States. Women of color experience racism, identity conflict, oppression, and colonialism within the White-dominant culture. They also experience sexism and oppression within their own ethnic and racial communities. Some women of color are oppressed for additional reasons, such as class and sexual orientation. The diverse experiences and needs of women of color are compounded by the multiple and interactive effects of racism, sexism, classism, ageism, heterosexism, ethnocentrism, ableism, and xenophobia and more. These complex dynamics are often neglected because, even today, many analyses of women are based on the experiences of White middle-class women. In spite of the uniqueness of each woman, women's diversity is easily oversimplified, even within the feminist movement itself. A heterogeneous perspective that reflects the richness and complexity of the lives of women of color must be encouraged. Diversity among women of color may create tensions between and among them and may lead to conflicts in perceptions, priorities, and goals. However, temporary tension and conflict can be used in a positive way to help women recognize important problems in a patriarchal society and to work together to transform that society. Without carefully listening to the voices of minority women and working with them to solve problems, women cannot move toward a better society in which all women celebrate and nurture their embodied spirituality.

To transform unjust society, women need to cultivate their capacity for reflecting upon and criticizing reality. Questioning the false realities that leave women's embodied lives broken is the starting point for the transformation of society. To raise questions of women's unequal status means to take responsibility to fight against it. Peggy Andrews mentions that "the brokers of power will never give up their power, so women around the world must learn how to empower themselves."<sup>103</sup> In the existing patriarchal culture, women's bodies are often misnamed, exploited, or abused. Women can help one another to reflect critically upon the reality of their embodied lives.

Spiritually mature women know the need for transformative action, and they search for an authentic world-transforming spirituality. The process of changing our society is a lifetime challenge and commitment, not a monthly activity in church. Women can begin this long-term commitment by first gathering together with others in small groups, and then by forming their own action groups, their own circles for support. The problems they face every day cannot be solved by any individual woman. Women may develop supportive networks of peers and community, and adequate social and emotional support in their own lives. Women need to find their own power to transform this unequal society through cooperating and empowering one another. The decision-making process includes care, listening to each other, and learning from the diverse voices of minority women. A vision of spiritual maturity is founded on a hope for liberation, freedom, and reconciliation, not only for women, but for people of all classes, races, and nations.

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<sup>103</sup> Andrews, 2.

### Conclusion

Based on the personal life stories of interviewees and the theories of feminist scholars, I suggested six aspects of a feminist vision of women's embodied spiritual maturity. These visions need to be constantly expanded and transformed throughout women's embodied experiences. To actualize these visions in women's embodied lives, religious educators need to develop an educational method. Embodied narrative method can be particularly effective in awakening women's embodied spirituality and empowering their embodied spiritual growth.

## CHAPTER 7

### Embodied-Narrative Method as an Educational Method

Religious educators who are concerned with human faith and its development have often emphasized the importance of story in the Christian faith and faith journey.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, story-telling has been an important educational method in religious education. Many educators understand the teacher as a story-teller, and discuss how to choose the story to tell, how to prepare to tell the story, and how to tell the story effectively in teaching.<sup>2</sup> For these educators, story often refers to the biblical or historical stories. Even though some stress the link between the biblical story and personal lives, the goal of story-telling is often to help the student to discern past truths.

What is missing in much of this work is attention to women's stories. These stories, whether biblical or contemporary, have rarely been told in the Christian faith community. Further, only a few recent books emphasize the importance of people telling embodied experiences and stories, or advocate people's story-telling as an educational method for empowerment and conscientization.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> James W. Fowler writes that human senses of identity and identification, the horizons of personal and collective meanings, and the convictional bases of one's faith arise in the telling of religious and cultural stories. See *Weaving the New Creation*, 127. John H. Westerhoff III also claims that Christians are a story-formed community, and that the story has formed and transformed, sustained and challenged the community's faith and life. See *Living the Faith Community*, 27. Thomas Groome writes that Christian Story is the whole faith tradition, however it is expressed or embodied, and he emphasizes that the Story of the faith community must be made accessible over and over again in order to know God and find salvation in one's history. See *Christian Religious Education*, 192-93.

<sup>2</sup> See Patricia Griggs, *Using Storytelling in Christian Education* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1981); Charles R. McCollough, *Heads of Heaven, Feet of Clay* (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1983); James Limburg, *Old Stories for a New Time* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1983); and William R. White, *Speaking in Stories* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing, 1982).

<sup>3</sup> Anne S. Wimberly, *Soul Stories*; Maura O'Neill, *Women Speaking, Women Listening*; Sam Amirtham, comp., *Stories Make People*; and Mary Elizabeth Moore, *Teaching from the Heart*.

The starting point of feminist pedagogy is women's experience and their expression of experience. Listening to women's voices, studying women's writings, and learning from women's experiences have been crucial to the feminist reconstruction of women's embodied spiritual growth. Many feminist educators who are concerned with women's spiritual growth suggest story-telling as a starting point for women's spiritual direction, helping women to reclaim and tell their own stories. In this chapter, I will discuss the effect of narrative interview on women's spiritual growth, the reasons to advocate an embodied-narrative method as an effective educational approach, and suggestions for enhancing the embodied-narrative method for women's embodied spiritual growth. Based on insights drawn from the narrative interviews and feminist literature, I will explore the potential of an embodied-narrative method in religious education.

#### Narrative Interview's Effect on Women's Spiritual Growth

The narrative interviews awakened interviewees to reflect on their spiritual journeys in relation to their bodily experiences. Even though the narrative interview was a new experience for most interviewees, they remembered their bodily experiences and found spiritual meanings in them. Narrative interview is a spiritual experience that can awaken and empower women's embodied spirituality. When I invited the interviewees to tell stories about their embodied spiritual journey, all of them had a hard time articulating these experiences and describing their bodily experiences in relation to their spiritual growth. Through a dialogue of questions and clarifications, interviewees began to remember their past histories and come to a deeper understanding of them.

Most of interviewees said that this narrative interview was a new and good experience for them. No one had asked them about their spiritual journey, especially their bodily



experiences in relation to their spiritual journey. They stated that the interview helped them to evoke memories of bodily experiences and to recognize the importance of bodily experiences in their spiritual journeys. The narrative interview helped them to remember painful memories, such as sexual abuse, unwanted pregnancy, marital conflict, or divorce, but also to find spiritual meaning in them. One interviewee asked for a copy of her storytelling because the interview was the first time that she told the full story of her experience of sexual abuse. She wants to hear her own voice.

Each interviewee told a story that interpreted past, present, and future. Most of the interviewees presented their embodied spiritual journeys chronologically. They described their past experiences and interpreted the meanings, they then described their present experiences and their visions for daily life and ministry. Even though the interviewees had a hard time opening their own embodied life stories, they tried to recall their experiences, to interpret their personal history and to find the spiritual meaning of their experiences. The narrative method gave women an opportunity to think about those experiences and to reflect upon the meaning.

The narrative interview also helped women acknowledge the importance of communal sharing and spiritual care. Interviewees, who experienced great healing and empowerment in women's groups, emphasized the importance of communal sharing and support for their spiritual journeys. (B, D, L, N, O, P). Many interviewees mentioned the lack of sharing women's embodied spiritual journeys in family and religious communities. Even their mothers did not provide spiritual nurturing that would enable their daughters to develop positive body images and to discern divine presence in their embodied experiences. Most interviewees did not have any ritual or communal gathering to

celebrate or to heal their bodily experiences in the family or church. Some interviewees who suffered from sexual abuse, unexpected pregnancy, or divorce especially needed spiritual healing, but their religious communities failed to provide any care.

The narrative interview influenced not only the interviewees, but also the interviewer's life. Narrative research is a dialogue that is characterized by a process of mutual influence and change. Both interviewer and interviewee are touched emotionally by each other, grow in the relationship, and are mutually affected. Listening to women's stories caused me to reflect more deeply upon my own spirituality. By listening to the diverse stories of the interviewees, I learned diverse experiences and perspectives, and was able to reflect critically upon my own embodied experiences. As a woman, some of the stories were similar to my own story.

The narrative method raised the issue of appropriate emotional involvement and responsibility by an interviewer. It was impossible to listen to women's tragic experiences such as child sexual abuse, molestation, and rape without emotional involvement, even painful involvement--for both the teller and the listener. Four interviewees who experienced sexual violence cried while they were telling their tragic experiences. Even though speaking aloud one's painful memory was a very difficult process, the interviewees honestly told of their pains and angers. The interviewees' self-disclosure, especially the expression of exceptionally painful and tragic memories, carries with it a responsibility for the researcher. Narrative method as an educational method can continue the process of story-telling to the benefit of the narrator. Narrative method as an educational method may overcome the limited relationship and limited time between

interviewer and interviewee, and expand the possibility of continuous and mutual sharing of women's experiences in a women's community.

### Embodied-Narrative Method as an Effective Educational Method

There are several reasons to claim the narrative method as a religious educational method for empowering and nurturing women's embodied spiritual growth. As I researched women's embodied spiritual growth by using the narrative method, I came to realize that this is not only a research method, but also an educational method.

Embodied-narrative method has the potential to awaken in women a sense of the power of their embodied spiritual journey and to empower them in their embodied spiritual growth. Embodied-narrative method can be an effective educational method for women's embodied spiritual growth for several reasons.

First of all, the embodied-narrative method can help women break their silence and express embodied experiences with their voices. Women seldom talk about their own bodily experiences in public places or religious communities. They have difficulty finding their authentic body-voice. In this narrative research, these women stated that the narrative interview helped them find their own voices and express their embodied experiences in relation to spiritual growth. Naming, shaping, and expressing their embodied experiences with their voices are the most fundamental elements in women's spiritual growth.

The importance of telling stories and finding voice is critical in feminist praxis, especially in consciousness-raising, which has been called the first step in feminist theory.<sup>4</sup> Consciousness-raising is a process that helps to transform the muted condition of

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<sup>4</sup> King, Women and Spirituality, 18.

women. Conscientization involves “recognition that what we have experienced, in isolation and silence, as private pain is in fact a public, structural dynamic.”<sup>5</sup> The process of consciousness-raising has awakened women and expanded their awareness of their own situation, their history, and their own power as embodied beings. During the narrative interviews, interviewees began to realize the importance of their embodied experiences and to find the spiritual meanings of them. This consciousness raising can be a very painful experience, but it is necessary to awaken recognition of disembodied spirituality and the unjust social reality and to empower them to expose that reality. Embodied-narrative method can make women deeply self-aware, also raising their social consciousness.

Second, narrative method is an effective educational method because women can find meaning in their spiritual lives. By telling and listening to a story, women can explore the meanings of their spiritual lives. By telling and listening to stories, women can discern the divine presence in their embodied experiences. By remembering their spiritual journey, women can recall God’s acting in their daily lives and in their faith community. By telling their faith stories, faith becomes a living faith, a lived-out faith, and women can restore the dignity that belongs to them, as people made in God’s own image.<sup>6</sup> Carol Christ clearly expresses the importance of telling women’s stories for women’s spiritual growth.

Without stories she [a woman] can not understand her self. Without stories she is alienated from those deeper experiences of self and world that have been called spiritual or religious. She is closed in silence. The expression of women’s

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<sup>5</sup> Harrison, Making the Connections, 243.

<sup>6</sup> Amirtham, viii.

spiritual quest is integrally related to the telling of women's stories. If women's stories are not told, the depth of women's soul will not be known.<sup>7</sup>

By sharing their life stories with others, women can find spiritual meaning and dignity as human beings. Despite interviewees' initial difficulty in reflecting on embodied experiences, many found it easy to talk about these experiences by end of the interviews. The discovery of the true embodied self and embodied experiences is a discovery of great spiritual meaning.

Third, narrative method is an effective educational method because, in sharing stories, women can find uniqueness in each person's story and commonalities among stories, thus affirming the many textures of their shared humanity. Women become aware of their varied experiences and their common concerns by sharing stories. The unique story of each person warns against the dangers of overgeneralizing women's embodied lives. Women in the narrative interviews told diverse stories of their spiritual lives within different racial, sexual, and cultural contexts. Women of color were especially sensitive to racist social structures and social prejudice regarding skin color. Lesbian women shared their experience of struggling for freedom to explore their authentic sexuality and express spiritual meaning in women's sexuality. The women's diversity suggests that people involved in religious education need to attend to a broad range of women's voices if they want to develop deep understandings of human life. In so doing, they maximize their knowledge of women's embodied spiritual growth.

However, despite their unique experience, women can join with other women in a common struggle, and they can share goals. Stories work as bridges connecting

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<sup>7</sup> Christ, Diving Deep and Surfacing, 1.

individual journeys in faith. By sharing their faith journey, women may find that “others have had experiences similar to theirs; this commonality of experience enables them to feel normal, to see the connections between their personal and cultural experiences.”<sup>8</sup>

Sharing women’s bodily experiences, such as menstruation, pregnancy, childbirth, and menopause, can provide women common ground. Without sharing their experiences, women often feel isolated and depressed. Through sharing their stories, women can enter a worldwide dialogue and create a new relational web. Ursula King suggests that sharing of stories of suffering, oppression, and joy, and sharing histories has created a new sense of solidarity among women expressed as “sisterhood.” Sisterhood can be a powerful experience and a powerful symbol of the togetherness--the relatedness of women in suffering and oppression, in giving birth and life, in nurturing and caring, in joy and ecstasy.<sup>9</sup> Sisterhood has created and strengthened an immense web linking different women.

Fourth, the narrative method is an effective educational method because women can share feelings from their hearts as they tell and listen to stories. Because of deep pain, fear and frustration, many women lock their feelings inside and hide their feelings from others. In the narrative interviews, many women freely expressed their pains, angers, or happiness. In a community of companionship and sharing, women can dare to name their suffering and their striving, and in the process they can begin their healing and begin their efforts to implement their visions.<sup>10</sup> Women from diverse backgrounds suffer similar

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<sup>8</sup> Fischer, Women at the Well, 23.

<sup>9</sup> King, 19-20.

<sup>10</sup> Carol Goldman, “Creating Sacred Emotional Space,” in Sacred Dimensions of Women’s Experience, ed. Elizabeth Dodson Gray (Wellesley, Mass.: Roundtable Press, 1988), 21.

experiences of humiliation, violation and pain. Victims of sexual or domestic violence especially need people who carefully listen to their feelings with love and fully trust their stories. This sharing of feeling has created and strengthened a bond of sisterhood among many women.

By sharing their stories, they can express their anger. Because women are educated to suppress their anger, they rarely express it openly. Repeated instances of suppressing anger can produce repeated experiences of frustration and inaction. Feminist scholars take note of the power of anger. The power of anger in feminist protest is a power that struggles for equality, liberation, and freedom.<sup>11</sup> Beverly W. Harrison writes of the creative power of anger. She suggests that women must wrest the power of action from their anger at what has been done to them and to their sisters and to brothers, they must use the anger for social and personal transformation.<sup>12</sup> Anger can mobilize people for action. Especially for victims of sexual violence, the expression of rage is healthy when it is appropriately directed at the perpetrator of the injustice, so that the victim is absolved and the perpetrator publicly accused of responsibility for the violent abuse.<sup>13</sup> When women dare to name their suffering, they can begin the process of healing and dreaming a new future.

Fifth, the narrative method is an effective educational method because women can find continuity with past, present, and future. By telling a story, they give meaning to their past experiences, express their present situation, and gain hope for their future.

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<sup>11</sup> King, 14.

<sup>12</sup> Harrison, Making the Connections, 7.

<sup>13</sup> Gudorf, Body, Sex and Pleasure, 188.

Women's vision and hope for humanization and spiritual maturity come from their past and present experience of oppression and discrimination. By the end of the narrative interviews, many interviewees named their visions of embodied spiritual growth by critically reflecting on their past and present. By recollecting the disembodied values of the past, women can grow beyond their present level. Moore emphasizes that "narratives can introduce new values by subverting the existing order or introducing new ways of ordering and coordinating the societies."<sup>14</sup> Based on past experiences, women can risk new experiences and can imagine a new future.

In this patriarchal society, women's voices have been silenced for a long time, and women have lost the rich heritage of their foremothers. Maria Harris points out that, by retelling the stories of forgotten women and their foremothers, woman can re-member or re-integrate forgotten parts of herself into the present life she leads and into the present person she is.<sup>15</sup> Women may discover their power for resistance against unjust society from their foremothers' heritage. They can have a vision of creating a new culture and a new story to explain the world with the wisdom that came from their foremothers. By remembering and telling old stories in the present context, women can create new stories. By using their imagination, women can link the stories of past, present, and future.

Finally, by telling and listening to story, women can discover dialectic relationships that exist between personal stories and social structures. By sharing stories, women can realize that their stories are not strictly a personal matter or a question of fact, but are closely related to the shape of social structures. They may realize that "personal is

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<sup>14</sup> Moore, Teaching from the Heart, 151.

<sup>15</sup> Harris, Dance of the Spirit, 34-35.



political.” Patriarchal social systems operate across all forms of personal experiences. Sexist mass media, criminal laws, religion, and educational institutions alienate women from their own bodies, energies, desires and passions. Moore emphasizes that cultural beliefs and values and patterns of action are actually formed and transformed through storytelling. Story is an important factor in social stability and change.<sup>16</sup> Dominant patriarchal beliefs and values are transmitted to women through the culture. Women must not conceive of their experiences as only personal experience. They have to interpret and analyze their personal experiences as shaped by the social situation and thus shared with other women. Patriarchal Christian tradition encourages fear and distrust of women’s bodies; it encourages a split between the body and the spirit. It is crucial to understand the political and socioeconomic relations that shape a life. By telling stories, women can discover the negative influence of institutionalized religion and patriarchal culture for their holistic spiritual growth.

Embodied-narrative method can be an effective educational method for awakening women’s embodiedness in their spiritual growth and empowering women’s embodied spiritual growth. By telling their embodied experiences, women can recover their own voices and search for the meaning and dignity of their embodied lives. Telling stories of their lives can be a process of self-awareness and consciousness-raising. Women can share their deep feelings with others by telling stories. By telling stories, women can develop their future vision based on their past and present experiences. By sharing stories, women can realize the uniqueness and dignity of each person’s life and also the diversity of human lives. Story-telling of one’s life experience is not limited to personal

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<sup>16</sup> Moore, Teaching from the Heart, 144.

stories. Women can find the interlocking nature of race, gender, class, and sexual oppression by telling of their embodied experiences. Personal experience must be interpreted and analyzed within a concrete social context.

Embodied-narrative method can be an effective educational method for awakening, empowering and nurturing women's embodied spiritual growth. To enhance the embodied- narrative method as a more effective educational method, religious educators and women's communities need to reflect critically upon present educational methods and transform these educational methods and processes.

### Enhancing Embodied-Narrative Method

Women in the Christian community have been the listeners of biblical stories told by pastors or educators for millenia. Even when women are invited to narrate their own stories, they often have a difficult time articulating them because of the enduring social control of women's voices. To construct and maintain social order, dominant groups exert control over "woman talk," preventing or discrediting it. According to Dale Spender, women are discouraged from talking, "either by being directly controlled by males in mixed-sex discourse or by being indirectly controlled by males who have systematically denied them places- and opportunities- to conduct single-sex talk."<sup>17</sup> Spender insists that women should become the "talkative sex" because woman talk is one of the most powerful means of subverting and transforming patriarchal order. Women need to value each other as talkers and listeners.<sup>18</sup> When women learn to listen to their inner voices and to tell their stories, they are enabled to grow spiritually.

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<sup>17</sup> Dale Spender, Man Made Language, 2nd ed. (London: Pandora Press, 1990), 108.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 137.

Unlike narrative interviews, limited to a momentary relationship between interviewer and interviewee, the embodied-narrative method can be developed into a full and comprehensive design. This design would include empowerment; integration and critique; companionship in teaching and learning, and community-building.

### Empowering Women to Remember and Construct Their Life Stories

To use embodied-narrative method as an effective educational method, women should empower one another to remember their embodied experiences and develop their stories in a constructive way. As described in earlier chapters, most interviews had kept secret the bodily experiences that had profoundly influenced their lives. Some of them had painful memories of sexual or other abuse as children, but they never told anyone. Several kinds of educational action can be important for empowering women to remember and construct their stories.

The first educational action is to help women trust their embodied experiences and inner voices. Many women have mistrusted their experiences and devoted themselves to disembodied spiritual growth. Women, thus, need to remember and reflect upon their embodied experiences. According to Kathleen Fischer, remembering is a way find the pattern of our lives, the shape that makes each life-experience unique and gives its meaning. Remembering the past is essential to one's becoming and as people recollect their lives before God, their stories take on new meaning as part of a larger story which embraces and redeems them.<sup>19</sup> Through reflection upon their experiences, women can discern for themselves how God is acting in their lives and in the world. Emma J. Justes emphasizes the importance of telling life stories, especially for older women. For her, the

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<sup>19</sup> Fischer, Winter Grace, 34-38.

telling of stories enables people to fit pieces of their lives together to make a whole picture with integrity and peace.<sup>20</sup> Justes observes that many women have kept secrets about their lives, and these secrets form barriers to their spiritual wholeness. Pastoral care for these women involves a willingness to face these secrets with other women.<sup>21</sup>

Prayer and meditation can help women attend to their own experiences, listen to their authentic voices, trust and express their inner wisdom, and discern the action of the Holy Spirit in their lives. Elizabeth Liebert suggests “contemplative attending” to women’s experiences. She writes that the basis of all spiritual care of women lies in effective attending to women’s experiences. The contemplation that grounds attentiveness to women’s experience is both an attitude of radical receptiveness to life and a spiritual practice of honoring this experience.<sup>22</sup> In education, women need opportunities to remember and honor their experiences.

A second educational action for empowering women is to engage them in historical and socio-economic analysis of their personal stories. This analysis aims to connect women’s narratives of specific experiences to the broader historical and social framework. Women need to consider how their bodily experiences have been distorted and misinterpreted in interaction with oppressive forces. In the narrative paradigm, persons can connect their stories with larger communal and societal narratives, and critically

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<sup>20</sup> Emma J. Justes, “Pastoral Care and Older Women’s Secrets,” in Through the Eyes of Women, 240-41.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 246.

<sup>22</sup> Elizabeth Liebert, “Coming Home to Themselves: Women’s Spiritual Care,” in Through the Eyes of Women, 268-69.

reflect on all of these stories in dialogue with one another.<sup>23</sup> Women need to examine critically the roots and dynamics of women's disembodied spirituality. Studying systems and structures in which women live, such as family life, economic structure, political structure, health care, law, and religion, may help women to analyze critically their stories and situation.

A third educational action for empowerment is to engage women in searching for alternate life visions. Story-telling must not be mere complaints about unjust situations. Complaining and blaming cannot transform women's lives; women need to create new visions, new images, new symbols, new ideas, and new actions. Story-telling provides a vehicle for re-imagining the future. According to Anne Streaty Wimberly, the narrative paradigm holds potential as a pathway to hope. By recognizing and analyzing stories, women can envision a new future, informed by "hope-inspiring beliefs."<sup>24</sup> In fact, Wimberly encourages people to tell stories containing hope-generating beliefs and hope-filled actions. Communal ritual can also help women exercise and share their imagination for embodied spiritual growth into the future.

A final educational action for empowerment is to encourage women to nourish their embodied spirituality. Spiritual exercises, such as prayer, meditation, and ritual, can nourish and empower women's story-telling and spiritual growth. Concrete actions for changing disembodied thinking and patriarchal beliefs also can empower women's embodied spiritual growth. Maura O'Neill insists that dialogue is commitment. Through

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<sup>23</sup> Anne Streaty Wimberly, "An African-American Pathway to Hope: Belief Formation through Uses of Narrative in Christian Education," Religious Education 91, no. 3 (summer 1996): 318.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 318.

sharing stories, women can learn one another's needs, the existence and extent of a culture's oppressive practice, women's reactions to those practices, and the most effective ways to end them.<sup>25</sup> Sharing stories is an attempt to learn responses for changing disembodied spirituality. Women cannot just dream their way out of the patriarchal society that hinders women's embodied spiritual growth. By sharing stories, women can empower one another to challenge patriarchal beliefs and social systems and to move toward women's embodied spiritual growth.

### Integrating and Critiquing of Narrative Truths

To share their spiritual journeys and discern their living wisdom, women need to integrate and critique the narrative truths that emerge from the Bible, historical tradition, and their own life stories. When women rely on the absolute authority of the Bible, they cannot discern the wisdom and truth of women's embodied spirituality. In this narrative research, women who believed in the absolute authority of the Bible follow the traditional views of women's bodies and bodily experiences, women's creation and fall, and women's role in the Bible. For example, one interviewee (E) said,

In the book of Genesis, when Eve sins, God tells her because of her sin, she's going to have labor pains, she's going to be dominated by her husband. I feel that women have it harder because of what is related in the Bible. . . . Women have to suffer because of what Eve did.

In the Bible, one finds patriarchal biases, misogynous views, and much silence regarding women. Several biblical texts and traditions have been used historically to justify women's limited place in society. These include: stories in which woman was created second (Genesis 2) and sinned first (Genesis 3 and the reinforcement of this view

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<sup>25</sup> O'Neill, 104.

in 1 Tim. 2:13-14); warnings that women must keep silent in church (1Cor.14; 1 Tim.2); and teachings that they should be submissive to their husbands (Ephesians 5).<sup>26</sup>

Regarding the loss of early Christian women's voices, Joanna Dewey argues that the world of early Christianity was a world of oral communication in which women were full participants as active proclaimers and storytellers as well as receptive listeners. However, the content of oral stories and women's stories were minimized and distorted by increasingly authoritative manuscript tradition. Manuscript-based authority was limited to the few upper-class males and their retainers in a patriarchal culture such as the Roman empire.<sup>27</sup>

Women must challenge the scriptural authority of patriarchal texts and explore how the Bible is used as tool against women in their struggle for liberation. Biblical stories, when patriarchally interpreted, no longer have authority to judge or interpret present human stories; yet women still seek messages of hope and liberation. Educators who advocate story-telling for women's spiritual growth invite women into a critical dialogue with biblical stories.

The issue of the authority of the Bible and human experience is one of the most controversial problems in the history of religious education. While fundamentalist and evangelical educators insist on the absolute authority of the Bible in religious education, often rejecting historical critical methods, progressive or liberal educators emphasize the

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<sup>26</sup> Katharine Doob Sakenfeld, "Feminist Uses of Biblical Materials," in Feminist Interpretation of the Bible, 57.

<sup>27</sup> Joanna Dewey, "From Storytelling to Written Text: The Loss of Early Christian Women's Voices," Biblical Theology Bulletin 26: 71-74.

importance of human experience in religious education. The Bible has been central to fundamentalist and evangelical education, and teaching the content of the Bible is held to be an absolute necessity. Lois E. LeBar says, “The strength of the Evangelical position has been the retention of the high view of Scripture.”<sup>28</sup> LeBar emphasizes that evangelicals have taught the Bible as truth to the exclusion of opinion of human beings; they have tried to understand it and faithfully to convey its meaning.<sup>29</sup> For progressive or liberal religious educators, the Bible is not the only center of religious education. George A. Coe, for example, emphasizes using the Bible in the interest of present living. He understands the Bible as “a source of material for social education.”<sup>30</sup> Progressive and liberal education often uses the Bible as a means of understanding religious experience in social interaction.

After liberal theology’s challenge to the literalistic understanding of the Bible, most religious educators have accepted historical-critical approaches to interpretation. James D. Smart criticizes both evangelicalism and liberalism’s positions on the Bible, however. For Smart, evangelicalism has a too narrow and literalistic understanding of the Bible, and liberalism relies too much on historical and critical methods.<sup>31</sup> Smart believes that the Bible is an essential subject of study, but it must also be seen in an appropriate historical context.

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<sup>28</sup> Lois E. LeBar, Education That is Christian (Wheaton, Ill: Victor Books, 1989), 148.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 148.

<sup>30</sup> George A. Coe, A Social Theory of Religious Education (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1917), 116.

<sup>31</sup> James D. Smart, The Teaching Ministry of the Church (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1954), 57-58.



Women cannot deny the fact that the Bible was shaped by males in a patriarchal culture, and its revelatory experiences were interpreted by men from a patriarchal perspective. The Bible has been used to reinforce male-dominated societies and religion and to discriminate against women. A patriarchal Bible-centered education is very dangerous for women because there is no room for challenging patriarchal traditions in the Bible or in the present. Women have begun to shift their paradigm from the absolute authority of the Bible to an integrative, critical approach in which the Bible is interpreted in dialogue with the experience of women as they struggle for liberation.

Feminist biblical scholars have focused on the prophetic-liberating traditions, reconstructing women's historical roles in religious communities, reinterpreting biblical texts, identifying with women's voices in the text, and analyzing the literary role of women in the text. Letty M. Russell stresses that women no longer need to divide feminist experience and biblical witness and to play the authority game. According to Russell, the two belong together, "as communities of struggle and faith in every age respond to the invitation to partnership with God in the mending of creation and discover that their lives and their understanding of the biblical witness have been changed."<sup>32</sup> Rosemary R. Ruether claims that the prophetic-messianic tradition is a critical principle for biblical interpretation. The prophetic-messianic tradition brings a critical perspective through which the biblical tradition is constantly reevaluated in new contexts; people search for the truly liberating Word of God over against the sinful deformations of

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<sup>32</sup> Letty M. Russell, "Authority and the Challenge of Feminist Interpretation," in Feminist Interpretation of the Bible, 146.

contemporary society and past biblical traditions.<sup>33</sup> According to Ruether, the absence of women's prophetic voice against their own oppression in the Bible is due to male-defined traditions that repeatedly omitted and reinterpreted women's prophetic participation.

Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza suggests that the Bible is understood as a structuring prototype of women-church and an enabling authority, rather than a normative archetype. She proposes that people seek revelation not just in biblical texts, but also in the experience of women struggling for liberation from patriarchy. She advocates a feminist critical hermeneutic of liberation in the context of believing communities of women.<sup>34</sup> Fiorenza advises women to recreate the texts drawing upon their imagination and historical-critical methods; in this way, they can challenge male-oriented perspectives.

One helpful educational approach is Anne S. Wimberly's story-linking process that connects stories of everyday lives, biblical stories, and postbiblical faith heritage stories. In this process, people link with Bible stories by using them as mirrors through which they reflect critically upon the liberation they have already found or are still seeking. People can enter into partnership with the characters of the Bible story, envision God's action today, and anticipate an ongoing response from God.<sup>35</sup> Wimberly suggests that people imagine themselves standing or sitting with the characters of the Bible story, and then enter into conversation with God alongside the characters of the Bible story.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Rosemary R. Ruether, "Feminist Interpretation: A Method of Correlation," in Feminist Interpretation of the Bible, 117.

<sup>34</sup> Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, "The Will to Choose or to Reject: Continuing Our Critical Work," in Feminist Interpretation of the Bible, 135-36.

<sup>35</sup> Wimberly, Soul Stories, 39-45.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 61.

People also connect with their Christian faith heritage by learning about exemplars of liberation and vocation. By linking with heritage stories, people may be encouraged and inspired by predecessors who have faced life circumstances with which they readily identify.<sup>37</sup> Wimberly especially engages Christian faith stories from her African American heritage. She proposes that educators choose stories that give African American people wisdom and power for liberation and vocation. Recognizing that these are “historical cultural choices,” she proposes that selections include stories chosen by African Americans across the years; these stories have inspired visions of liberation and vocation in the past.<sup>38</sup>

The relationship between biblical stories and women’s stories is an important issue for feminists since women are aware of the role of the Bible in women’s domination and dehumanization. Biblical stories can become models for spiritual growth, however, and “open-ended invitations to explore further.”<sup>39</sup> Women no longer need to deal with the dilemma of choice between the Bible-centered education and experience-centered education. When women who are story-tellers of their embodied spiritual journeys meet story-tellers in the Bible, and when they integrate and critically reflect on these faith stories, they can learn truths from the Bible and their own lives. In light of this assumption, integration and critique are important for narrative education. When women are encouraged to interpret stories critically and constructively, they can transform the biblical texts, the world, and their own lives as well.

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 45-47.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 116-18

<sup>39</sup> Don Carrington and Johnathon Hogarth, “Stories Make People,” in Stories Make People, 13.

### Offering Companionship in Teaching and Learning

To share their own stories more effectively, women need to create a new understanding of teaching and learning, placing emphasis on companionship. Unlike authoritarian teaching methods, feminist religious education needs to construct more creative, nurturing, and healing methods. In a feminist process of teaching and learning, each woman is the subject of education, creating new knowledge, building authentic relationship with other women, and helping to construct a cooperative learning method.

To participate in women's spiritual growth, educators need to have a new image of themselves as companions of faith. Women who search for new images of the educator or spiritual director suggest a helpful metaphor of educator as "midwife."<sup>40</sup> Midwife-teachers are the opposite of banker-teachers. Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule say, "While the banker deposits knowledge in the learner's head, the midwife draws it out. They assist the students in giving birth to their own ideas, in making their own tacit knowledge explicit and elaborating it."<sup>41</sup> Midwife teachers encourage the students to speak in their own authentic voices. The role of educators or spiritual directors is not to teach a certain truth or value, but rather to help women in giving birth to their own truth. Educators need to recognize themselves as fellow travelers on the same road in the spiritual journey.

Margaret Guenther describes the spiritual director's or educator's task as spiritual midwife, comparing it with childbirth.<sup>42</sup> Spiritual growth is prolonged and gradual,

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<sup>40</sup> Fischer, Women at the Well; Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule; and Guenther. Also Mary Elizabeth Moore has a chapter on midwife teaching in her book, Teaching from the Heart.

<sup>41</sup> Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger and Tarule, 217.

<sup>42</sup> Guenther, 92-107.

sometimes even hidden. Guenther describes the role of the spiritual midwife in three stages. The first stage is “the time of presence, patience, and waiting.”<sup>43</sup> As the midwife who waits for labor, educators need to be with women and wait for the transitional period. As midwives of spirit, they need to deal with waiting and encourage others to wait for the seed to sprout and grow to maturity. The second stage is the time of active work. As pain becomes stronger, the birthgiver needs the great support and wisdom of the midwife.<sup>44</sup> The midwife, who knows the time of transition, can help women know the time of change and transformation, and encourage them to give birth. Through the time of waiting and preparing together, both midwife and birthgiver establish a relationship of trust. The last stage is the time of celebration. After the midwife and birthgiver pass safely through the whole process, they can celebrate the new life.<sup>45</sup> When women become midwives for each other, they can help give birth to new life, and nourish their thoughts, feelings, and dreams together.

As a spiritual midwife, educators need to recognize that life crises are times of high vulnerability and great potential for spiritual growth. Through their life cycles, women experience expected and unexpected transitions. Educators need to help women prepare for their expected transitions such as menstruation, pregnancy, childbirth, and menopause. Educators also need to care about women’s hurtful and sometimes traumatic transitions such as abortion, divorce, rape, or miscarriage.

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 92.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 105.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 106-07.

In this image, teacher and student are encouraged to collaborate in constructing new knowledge, as well as using their established knowledge in everyday life. Women have a tendency to doubt their own thoughts and creative power because they have often been compelled to follow the thoughts of others. Feminist teaching and learning needs to focus on encouraging women to trust their own wisdom and creativity, and to nurture one another to maturity. Wimberly suggests that the facilitator of story sharing and story linking needs to be one whose own life is transformed by story.<sup>46</sup> When women are thus transformed by story and trust their ability to create new knowledge, they can be midwives of wisdom.

In addition to the midwife, another companionship image of teaching and learning is the dance, an image developed by Maria Harris. Like a dance, the teaching and learning process can “go backward or forward, can incorporate one another, can involve turn and re-turn, can move down as well as up, out as well as in, and be sometimes partnered, sometimes solitary.”<sup>47</sup> In dance, people do not come to the next step by planning it beforehand, but the next step emerges by doing the bodily work. Harris understands that teaching and learning emerge from the incorporative relationship between teacher and student in a natural rhythm.

In narrative method, nobody has exclusive power to control the telling and sharing of stories. There is no strict division between teacher and student; both can be teller and listener. They are spiritual companions who make the spiritual journey together. The teacher, however, may need to guide and empower students in role of midwife.

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<sup>46</sup> Wimberly, “African-American Pathway to Hope,” 332.

<sup>47</sup> Harris, *Women and Teaching*, 14.

### Building Communities of Mutual Understanding and Empowerment

To share their own stories more effectively, women need to build a community of mutual understanding and empowerment. By sharing stories, women can discover their common faith journey. In the narrative interview, some women shared their stories of transforming experiences within caring, nurturing, and empowering communities. They emphasized the importance of community in women's spiritual journeys. Women need to ensure spaces wherein persons can enter dialogue in open, caring, and supportive ways. Coming together and building a community are especially important for women who need spiritual support and encouragement. Women need a community in which women can grow spiritually, not in competition and aggression, but in trust and cooperation. A community of companionship supports women in gathering their energy and spirit to search for new ideas, feelings, and actions. Sometimes, women need all-female gatherings to form this critical culture. Rosemary Radford Ruether points out that a separatist time for women should not be confused with ideological separatism. Ideological separatism denies the male capacity for authentic humanness and imagines a totally separate society without men.<sup>48</sup> Women need their own community to collectivize their own experiences and form a critical counterculture to patriarchy, but this women's community is not an end in itself.

The relation between sharing stories within a trusting relationship and building a community is cyclical. In trusting and caring relationships, women can share their stories. By sharing stories, women can trust more and care for each other, thus building stronger community. Maura O'Neill points out that an atmosphere of trust results in a cyclical

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<sup>48</sup> Ruether, Women-Church, 59-60.

movement of listening and speaking. Speaking personal stories yields trust, which in turn opens one to listen further. This listening encourages women to disclose their selves.<sup>49</sup>

Wimberly also stresses the importance of “compassionate listening.” When we listen compassionately, people show a genuine interest in the concerns and sufferings of others. Compassionate listening is part of creating an environment in which persons feel comfortable to share and are encouraged to speak.<sup>50</sup>

Wimberly presents four developmental stages of groups. Newly-constituted groups typically go through an initial stage or orientation or encounter. In this stage, it is important for leaders not to compel persons to share. New groups may then move to the second stage characterized by conflict, dominance, and differentiation. Group members struggle with an increased desire to identify the direction the group should go. Through the process of struggling, group members may move to the third stage characterized by a sense of group cohesiveness and productivity. In this group process, group members can exercise a mutual sojourner role with one another. Finally, a group may move to the last stage characterized by free movement between constructive independence and interdependence. In this final stage, the participants are fully invested in their own and others’ ability to discern what the story-linking process has to say to them.<sup>51</sup> These stages are very helpful for educators in understanding the situation of their communities and in deciding what is needed to lead groups.

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<sup>49</sup> O’Neill, 90.

<sup>50</sup> Wimberly, Soul Stories, 33-34.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 138-43.



Women's spirituality becomes mature by sharing and living with other sisters. When women suffer from unexpected transitions such as miscarriage, rape, abortion, divorce, and death of lovers, they can travel together through the pain and healing. At such times, women often need a protective and healing circle. Sometimes, just being present with love can be a healing action.

Women can also be prepared and nurtured for normal life transitions in a women's faith community. In patriarchal communities, women may experience menstruation with shame and humiliation; however, the same experience can be celebrated as a time of creative power within a women's liberating community. Mothers and sisters in community can help young women to prepare for expected transitions such as menstruation, pregnancy, childbirth, marriage, and retirement; they can share the wisdom gained through their own life transitions. Young women can also care for older women-- by helping them in their physical weakness and by respecting their spiritual wisdom and power.

Supportive communities are often built with rituals. Christine Downing suggests that rituals have performative power for women in their search for meaning. For instance, in a female ritual context, menstruation means "more than the beginning of reproductive capacity, it means initiation into shared sisterhood with all who bleed."<sup>52</sup> Older sisters and women can prepare rituals for young girls at the beginning of menstruation. They can help young girls critique negative images of menstruation and recover the creative and mystical power of bleeding. To use the life transitions as an opportunity for spiritual growth, women need to search for new meanings and possibilities in each transition. In

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<sup>52</sup> Downing, 78.

this seeking, women are companions on the same spiritual journey. By sharing stories, women can realize they are not alone. In a faith community, women can create new meanings of women's embodied spiritual growth.

### Conclusion

Religious educators have the creative opportunity to develop new ways to support women in their embodied spiritual growth. Embodied-narrative method is an effective educational method to help women find meanings in their embodied spiritual lives, to name their experiences with their own voices, and to empower one another in embodied spiritual growth. Women need to work together to enhance the embodied-narrative method as an effective and ever-expanding educational method in women's communities.

## CHAPTER 8

### Conclusions

This dissertation examined the importance of women's embodied experiences in their spiritual journeys and searched for an alternative feminist means for understanding women's embodied spiritual journeys by using the embodied-narrative method. By using an embodied-narrative method, religious educators can continue to expand their understanding of women's embodied spiritual growth and help women awaken their embodied spirituality and empower their spiritual growth. There are major conclusions of this study.

First of all, the present faith development theories do not carefully consider the importance of women's embodied experiences in relation to faith development or spiritual growth. Religious educators need to develop alternative ways for understanding women's embodied spiritual growth. Based on feminist theories that describe the importance and characteristics of women's embodied experiences, religious educators need to develop alternative ways for understanding women's embodied spiritual growth in a holistic way.

Second, the narrative interview is an effective research method for listening to women's authentic voices. Religious educators need to listen to women's voices in order to understand women's embodied spiritual growth and discover visions of spiritual maturity. In this research, interviewees are limited to twenty adult women in Pennsylvania, New York, and California. As exploratory research, this can lay groundwork for further research. By inviting more women in diverse groups to share

their stories, religious educators may come closer to understanding women's embodied spiritual growth more fully.

Third, women need feminist visions of embodied spiritual maturity. In spite of the importance of women's bodies in their spiritual journeys, many Christian women do not recognize the importance of embodied spirituality, or they have difficulty finding the spiritual meanings of their bodily experiences. Religious educators need to help women create and recreate feminist visions of embodied spiritual maturity through their past and present experiences and to follow the feminist visions in their spiritual lives.

Finally, embodied-narrative method can be an effective educational method in supporting women's embodied spiritual growth in their educational contexts. Embodied-narrative method can help women to discern the spiritual meanings of their embodied experiences, and to nurture and to empower one another's embodied spiritual growth.

One interviewee in this research describes a woman's spiritual growth as a "puzzle." Paula Buford symbolizes women's spiritual growth as "quilting."<sup>7</sup> Both puzzle and quilting images suggest that women are creating a new beauty and new future through their spiritual journeys. Women are helping each other to cultivate the beauty of each person's life and to create harmony among them. When women become storytellers of their embodied lives and listeners of others' embodied stories, women can grow fully as embodied spiritual beings together.

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<sup>7</sup> Paula Buford, "Women and Community: Women's Study Groups as Pastoral Counseling," in Through the Eyes of Women: Insights for Pastoral Care (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 296.

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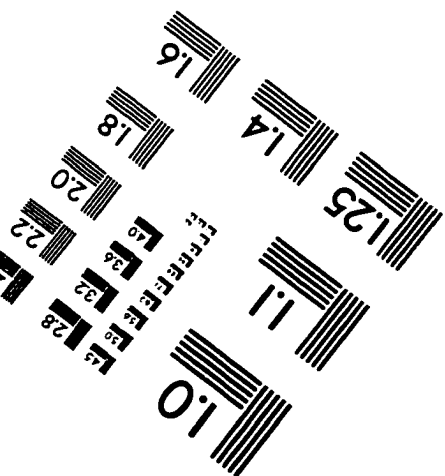
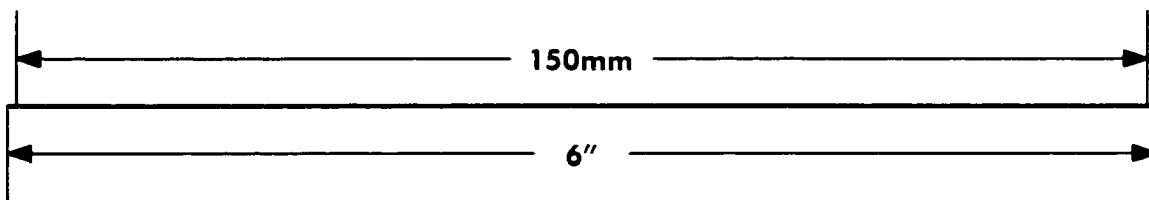
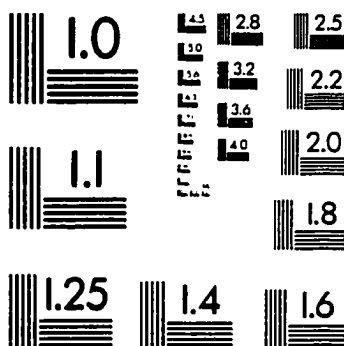
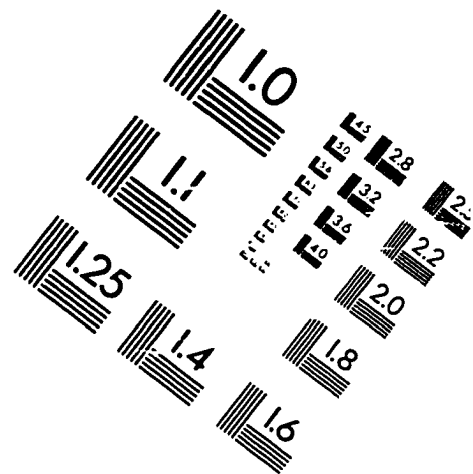
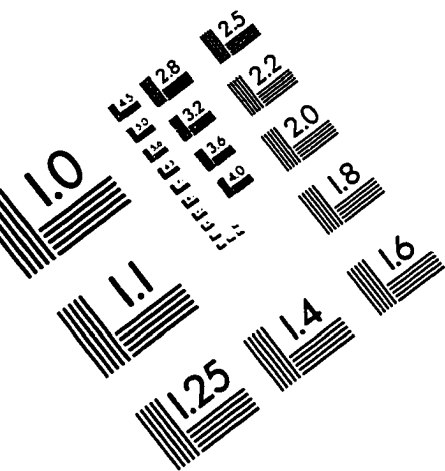
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